

## QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

### 76.5 How Can I Profitably Study the Bible by Myself?

#### Part V

*Scripture: Luke 2:25-35*

This is the fifth lesson of a six part series. I believe the better part of wisdom is that we conclude next week because it is more important that we read the Bible itself rather than lessons about the Bible. Nevertheless, just as the reading and understanding of great literature requires recognized methods of study, so the illumined person has greater insight and reward by yielding to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and by following certain time honored guidelines.

Our concern today has to do with additional suggestions concerning the interpretation of Scripture. Under the general heading, **Perceptualize What Is Being Said**, we have considered the hermeneutical principles of interpreting by determining the correct meaning of words, by understanding grammar, the light of context, by recognizing the unity of Scripture, by regard for the author's purpose in writing, by viewing what the writer opposed, and by discerning carefully what belongs to the believer. To this list can be added the following:

#### **H. Interpret by Recognizing the Method of Instruction:**

Actually, there are several forms of literature to be found in the Bible. In our study we will not attempt thorough review of these, but the issue is raised so that the student will be mindful that these do exist.

##### **1. Figures of Speech Are Used:**

A figure of speech is a word or phrase which is used to express something other than its literal meaning. Here we have **metaphors** which are comparisons of unlike objects. (John 10:9; 15:1; I Corinthians 11:24) There are also **similes** where the comparison of like objects is expressed. (Job 41:24; Hosea 6:4) These figures of speech are understood in the light of context or by taking the most natural meaning. (Isaiah 1:30) Related passages may also be of importance. Another figure of speech is **metonymy**. Here a particular thought is raised by the suggestion of

a word which bears an associated meaning. (Matthew 3:5; Job.34:6) The literal meaning of such a passage would not make sense. Another figure of speech is **apostrophe** where things are treated as persons. (Psalm 68:16) This is much akin to **personification**. (Psalm 98:8; Deuteronomy 32:1) There is also **hyperbole** which is exaggeration. Psalm 119:136; Deuteronomy 1:28; Jeremiah 19:4) Lastly, we might mention **irony**. This is saying the very opposite of what is meant. (II Samuel 6:20) Figures of speech form an important part of Scripture. Understanding them will aid us in knowing that the Word of God makes sense at all times.

We should, therefore, keep our eye out for figurative language. In seeking to interpret figurative language one should first try to understand the literal meaning in the original setting, and then go on to discern the truth the figure is leading to. For example, Isaiah 59:1 states, *“The Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear.”* What better way for God to tell us something than to do it in terms we can understand? We are aware of incapable hands and ears which do not hear. This is the literal meaning. The figure points to the fact that God is not limited in any way in His ability to hear and understand or to exercise His power to help.

## 2. **There Is Prophecy in the Bible:**

God gave some men of old the ability to speak of the future as if it was the present or past. Prophets were people who spoke for God. Sometimes their message dealt only with the present and past. This was a matter of “forthtelling” rather than “foretelling.” Whichever the occasion demanded, the prophet's aim was always to urge people to a relationship with God. There are many important guidelines for interpreting prophecy which is a study in itself. (Example: Isaiah 7:10-17)

## 3. **There Is Poetry in the Bible:**

Poetry is a way of declaring the deepest as well as the loftiest longings and thoughts of the human heart. It is a form of literature which often employs language which is unusually beautiful. It is often characterized by sentence structure which has rhyme and rhythm. There is much poetry to be found in the Bible and it is found in the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Lamentations and in some parts of the prophets. It is suggested that Jesus sometimes was poetical. The American Revised

translation may not give such an impression, but the Revised Standard Version as well as other versions use the poetical (accentuate) form. Guidelines for interpretation include the recognition of figures of speech, and the recognition of lines which are related to each other. This is known as parallelism and is the prominent feature of Hebrew poetry. One line throws light upon the other. (See Psalm 51:2) One should also recognize that poetry sometimes employs harsh and extreme language.

#### **4. There Are Parables in the Bible:**

Parables have been defined as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. In the parable one thought is placed next to another. The first is a familiar one which gives understanding to the second. The proper interpretation of parables depends upon understanding the earthly details presented, the spiritual condition of those to whom the parable is directed, and that which makes up the key point of the story. An example of parabolic teaching is found in Matthew 13:1-23.

#### **5. There Are Types and Symbols in the Bible:**

A symbol is anything which has a meaning in addition to the generally accepted one. An example is found in I Peter 5:8 where Satan is likened to a roaring lion. See also Jeremiah 24:1-3 which describes a vision of two baskets of figs. Types are recognized as Old Testament portrayals of New Testament realities. An example is found in John 3:14-15 and Numbers 21:4-9.

Here are five methods of instruction which the Bible employs. There are others. One might go on to speak of idioms, allegories, riddles and that which is described as simple narrative. An example of the latter is that of Joseph. Here a story inspires some relationship to God where no commands are set forth. It is important that we recognize the method of instruction.

#### **I. Interpret the Bible by Understanding that Revelation Is Progressive:**

Not a few people through the years have taken the Bible in hand, closed their eyes, breathed a prayer of sorts, and placed their finger upon a particular passage with the desire that this would be God's particular message to them at that time. It is well when the passage reads, *"Come unto me, all that that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest for your souls."* (Matthew

11:28-29) But what happens when the finger points to a passage such as is found in Matthew 1:10-11 which reads, *“And Hezekiah begat Manasseh; and Manasseh begat Amon; and Amon begat Josiah, and Josiah begat Jeconiah and his brethren, at the time of the carrying away to Babylon?”* (Matthew 1:10-11) Here arises the question of miracle upon demand. Do we have a right to claim it? The fact of the matter is that God reserves the jurisdiction to assign His word as He wills it. Experience has shown that people who approach the Bible without an understanding of the nature and make up of the book sometimes find it devoid of meaning for them.

Certain parts of the Bible are designed to speak specifically to certain groups of people. We may speak of a **patriarchal period** when there was neither church, temple or system of laws. God spoke to heads of families during this time. He spoke through visions, dreams and angels. This period began with Adam and appeared to last until the time when the Law was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Another period followed which has come to be known among Bible scholars as the **Mosaic and Prophetic period**. It lasted about 1500 years. It began with Moses and ended when Christ died on the cross. During this period there was a tabernacle and temple as the center of worship. There was a series of laws with the Ten Commandments as the focal point. Also, a carefully appointed priesthood regulated religious life. We are living in the **Christian period** which began when Jesus died and rose again. Its duration will be until He returns. The law of Moses has been replaced by the law of the Lord Jesus Christ. His law spiritualizes the Old Testament law and includes attitude as contrasted to act alone. His temple is not that which is made with hands.

It is for this reason that we believe that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament. In no way does the Old Testament have primacy over the New. The New Testament fulfills the Old Testament, it does not reject it. The principles of the Old Testament are eternal; their mode of administration is temporal. This does not mean that the Old Testament has no value for Christians. The Apostle Paul wrote to Corinthian believers, *“Now these things happened unto them for our example; and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come.”* (I Corinthians 10:11) The experiences of former believers are to be studied and believers today are to be guided by them. Paul also wrote to the Galatians, *“the law is become our tutor to bring us to Christ.”* (3:24) A study of the Old Testament is necessary to have an understanding of the New Testament.

God has given us one Bible which includes two testaments. We have one author and plan of redemption. But God has been pleased to reveal His will for man in a progressive way. In the earlier period He did not make known His complete standard and plan as these have been made known in Christ and His apostles. Our doctrine is drawn from the epistles of the New Testament. The epistles interpret the Gospels. Jesus did not develop a systematic order of belief during His lifetime. There were at least two reasons for this. First, normative interpretation of his life, death, and resurrection could not be given until these events actually took place.

**Secondly**, the Holy Spirit could not be sent in Jesus' name until that name had been earned. (John 7:39) The fact is that Jesus completed the Old Testament while He ushered in the New. Therefore, it is for the Epistles to interpret the Gospels. In the Old Testament people are divided into two groups, Jews and Gentiles. In the New Testament there is a third group which is introduced, which transcends these. Both Jews and Gentiles are joined to Christ by faith and are made "*into one new man.*" (Ephesians 2:15) Here both are transformed into that which is new and unique and which is known as the Church. The letters of the New Testament were written to individual churches and by the figure of metonymy applies to all believers of all ages.

#### **J. Interpret the Bible by Recognizing that Christ Is the Theme:**

The main theme of the Bible is not prophecy, baptism, or coming events as they are spoken of. The main theme is Jesus Christ and His redemption. As one seeks to find this theme in the various parts of the Bible, the Bible will become intelligible. It is at this point that many have faltered. The Biblical Pharisees had a head full of Scripture. All of their beliefs were supposedly drawn from Scripture. These same men looked at Jesus and "*He is possessed with Satan.*" Clearly, it is not enough to read and even memorize Scripture. Some people, we may conclude, revere the Bible above the message of the Bible. We would do well to remember that the same people who lifted up the Scripture also lifted Jesus up on a cross. This is what Jesus had in mind when he exclaimed, "*Ye have not His Word abiding in you: for whom He hath sent, Him ye believe not. Search the Scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me. And ye will not come to Me, that ye might have life.*" (John 5:38-40) These were people who had their minds full of Scripture, they were able and, willing to defend Scripture, but they had not God's Word abiding in their hearts. What is God's Word? The Word is Jesus. (Hebrews 1:1-2; John 1:1, 3-4, 14)

**K. Interpret By Giving Place To The Holy Spirit:**

A very important story is told in Luke 2:25-35. It has to do with the presentation of Jesus as an infant in the temple at Jerusalem. The babe had the appearance of any other. There was no circle of light over His head. No glowing aura set Him apart. These are the imaginations of artists only. The fact is that there was nothing special about the physical appearance of Jesus. (Isaiah 53:2) Yet, a devout man by the name of Simeon took the infant in his hands and immediately recognized Him as the promised Messiah. He held the tiny Jesus up and exclaimed, *“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.”* (Luke 2:29-30)

In like manner some people pick up the Bible and see nothing more than another book. It differs little if at all from millions of others. They see only that which is history, poetry, and parable. Others take the book in hand and as Simeon of old, behold the Christ of God. They see Jesus reflected in its pages. They behold salvation, life and peace. Why was it that people in the temple on that day so long ago rushed by Joseph, Mary and Jesus without even a second glance? Why did they not see what Simeon saw? Why do some find salvation in Scripture and others do not? We are not left to speculate. The reason is to be found in the person of the Holy Spirit. Here the Scriptures declare, *“It was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's salvation.”* (Luke 2:26) By spiritual revelation Simeon saw that Jesus was God's Messiah. By this same spiritual enablement we are able to discern the truth and meaning of Scripture. We interpret profitably through the Holy Spirit's ministry to us.

Alan B. Christensen, Pastor, Hope Evangelical Free Church, Wilton, CT,  
October 22, 1978