

CONFIDENCE IN THE BIBLE PART FOUR: INTERPRETATION

II Peter 1:20-21

"First of all, you should know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation,²¹ because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."

INTRODUCTION

John MacArthur is a pastor and author known for his internationally syndicated radio program *Grace to You*. He's served as Teaching Pastor of Grace Community Church in Los Angeles since February 9, 1969. He is also currently President of The Master's College in Newhall, California and The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles. MacArthur has built his ministry upon a careful and solid interpretation of the Bible. In *How to Get the Most from God's Word* (1997), John MacArthur tells of a young couple from another church who came to one of his assistant pastors for counseling about marital problems that began soon after their wedding. After just a few minutes of interviewing them, he could tell they were miles apart in tastes, ideas, and opinions. He asked, "What made the two of you get married?" The wife said, "A sermon our pastor preached on Joshua conquering Jericho." "What did that have to do with getting married?" "Well," the husband explained, "Joshua and his army claimed Jericho, marched around it seven times, and the walls fell down. Our pastor told us that if we trusted God, we could claim a young girl, march around her seven times, and the walls of her heart would collapse and she would be willing to marry. So I did it, and we got married." The assistant pastor stared in disbelief. Was this man putting him on? No; indeed. In fact, several couples in that particular church got married on the same basis after hearing the same sermon. This bizarre tale illustrates how much people can become extremely confused on what the Bible means and what to do about it. The proper interpretation and application of Scripture can be crucial to our life decisions!

In *Common Interpretation Pitfalls* (2014), posted by John MacArthur online, he states, "Reading God's Word answers the question: *What does the Bible say?* But interpreting it answers the question: *What does the Bible mean by what it says?* . . . The reader does not have license to *decide* what it means. He has to *learn* what it means." Yet, many who read the Bible are guilty of *deciding* what it means; bending it to suit their wishes. A professional boxer was converted to Christ. He felt it was wrong to continue hitting and hurting people but he knew only boxing as a profession. He sought counsel of his church deacons. One told him, "Don't see why you can't continue. The Bible says, "'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). Is this truly what Jesus meant by these words? Do we ever interpret God's commandments as loosely as this deacon? A boy was playing loudly with his sister when a cranky neighborhood woman asked them to quiet down. The boy turned to his sister and said, "I just hate her!" His little sister, greatly shocked, said, "Oh no! Jesus told us we must love our neighbor" (Luke 10:27). He replied, "Old Mrs. _____ wasn't born when that was written." Disobedient Christians often use such lame excuses.

The Bible is history's most published, studied, translated, and quoted book. It is also history's most misinterpreted book. Cults and false religions abuse it as deftly as Christians who choose to misinterpret it. Some Mormons still claim we should practice polygamy like the patriarchs did. Jehovah's Witnesses often refuse blood transfusions due to a faulty views of the command to "abstain . . . from blood" in Acts 15:22–29 (which clearly referred to eating meat from which blood was not properly drained). Such faulty interpretation occurs so often that many assume the Bible has no clear meaning. They claim we are fools for placing confidence in the authority of the Bible. These assumptions are false. God's Spirit inspiring the Bible's text and the human writers had a clear meaning in mind and we can know this meaning. Today's sermon will help us know if we are Guilty of Bible Misinterpretation. We are guilty if we:

A. Treat the Bible as a Magic Book and Ignore the Immediate Context

The Bible is not a Ouija Board to consult like a fortuneteller. This invites Satanic deception and other

dangers. There's an old joke about a man facing almost certain financial ruin. He asked God for guidance at that critical moment in his life. He then opened his Bible and the first verse his eyes fell upon, **Matthew 27:5** (KJV), stated, "And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself." Confused, he closed the Bible, asked God to clarify what He was telling him to do. When he opened his Bible a second time, the first words he read were from **Judges 7:17** (KJV): "And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise." Think of the chaos in your own life if a particular phrase or sentence you used on any given day was isolated from the context in which you spoke it! We should have more respect for God than to lift His words from the context in which He carefully placed them.

The first rule of Bible Interpretation is to ask this question about what we read: "What did it mean then?" As John MacArthur pointed out, "The reader does not have license to *decide* what it means. He has to *learn* what it means." This is the exact point the Apostle Peter makes in today's text: "First of all, you should know this: No prophecy of Scripture comes from one's own interpretation,²¹ because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." Peter's words can be understood two ways. First, Israel's prophets who received inspired messages from God's Spirit did not dare put their "own interpretation" upon what God meant to say. They kept their opinions to themselves. Their words had no Divine authority behind them unless they "spoke from God as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." They were entitled to their opinions, but they had no right to claim this is what God said or what God meant. Peter and the early apostles were as careful not to put their "own interpretation" upon the life and teachings of **Jesus**, as the *context* found in **II Peter 1:16-19** reveals, which immediately precedes our text: "For we did not follow cleverly contrived myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; instead, we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.¹⁷ For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, a voice came to Him from the Majestic Glory: This is My beloved Son. I take delight in Him!¹⁸ And we heard this voice when it came from heaven while we were with Him on the holy mountain.¹⁹ So we have the prophetic word strongly confirmed. You will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dismal place. . . ."

Secondly, Peter meant to caution those who read the Bible not to put our "own interpretation" upon what God's Spirit is speaking to us. A sincere theological student had committed himself to start his ministry in the north of England when he received a very attractive invitation to join a teaching institution in South Wales instead. At first, he believed it would be dishonorable to withdraw from his commitment to the English church. But one day, he read these words in **Isaiah 43:6** (KJV): "I will say to the north, Give up." He immediately concluded God was telling him to "give up" on his promise, to free him to accept the second invitation. But after contacting the school in South Wales, he failed to get this position. He then went north to the church after all, wondering what had gone wrong. As he reread **Isaiah 43:6**, he noticed the words, "I will say to the north, Give up;" were followed by, "and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth," which promised the future regathering of the Israelites to their homeland. At this point, it dawned upon him he'd found meaning in the text that was never really there. *The concerns he brought to his reading of the text had governed his interpretation of it.*

The first rule of Bible Interpretation is to ask this question about what we read: "What did it mean then?" In **Matthew 27:5**, God wants us to know what Judas did after experiencing remorse over betraying **Jesus** to the Jewish religious leaders seeking His death, as the *context* of **Matthew 27:1-10** makes clear. God never intended this verse to be used as crisis guidance! Interpreting any Bible passage accurately requires attention to its *context*, which at minimum means the full paragraph in which it is found, and often requires appreciation of the book as a whole in which it appears. For example, the words of **Psalms 18:8-10** are understood to be poetic imagery to express God's anger against David's enemies who sought his death to prevent him from becoming Israel's king: "Smoke rose from His nostrils, and consuming fire came from His mouth; coals were set ablaze by it.⁹ He parted the heavens and came down, a dark cloud beneath His feet.¹⁰ He rode on a cherub and flew, soaring on the wings of the wind." Were such words found in

one of Paul's letters we might think we should conceive of the Lord God as a giant; and sometimes as an angry giant! The type of literature nearly always affects how to interpret a passage. The Bible contains a Legal Code, History, Poetry and Songs, Wisdom Sayings, Gospels, and Letters. Awareness of idioms is also important. In **Job 23:16** (KJV), "God maketh my heart soft" means "fearful" (not "tender-hearted"). "Break the teeth of the wicked" in **Psalms 3:7** means "render powerless" (not "knock their teeth out"). Ignorance of idioms or figures of speech can prove disastrous. In **Jesus'** day, people often used hyperbole: intentional exaggeration to convey the seriousness of the point being made. **Jesus** employed it in **Matthew 5:29-30**: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to go into hell!" **Jesus** never intended for us to follow His words literally. By using hyperbole, **Jesus** made the emphatic point, "Don't allow anything to keep you from gaining Heaven!"

The second key question to interpret the Bible accurately is, "What does it mean today?" **Matthew 27:5**'s historical record obviously means the same to us today: "And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself." But verses like **Romans 16:16a** require an updated meaning: "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Today we understand this to mean, "Express to fellow Christians the warm greeting appropriate to your particular culture, as the 'holy kiss' was then appropriate."

Here's the third key question to ask to interpret the Bible accurately: "How can this verse best be applied to my life?" Rick Warren, founding pastor of the Saddleback Church southeast of Los Angeles, suggests nine ways to apply any particular Bible verse by asking ourselves these questions: 1) Is there a SIN to confess? 2) Is there a PROMISE to claim? 3) Is there an ATTITUDE to change? 4) Is there a COMMAND to obey? 5) Is there an EXAMPLE to follow (positive examples to follow or negative ones to avoid)? 6) Is there a PRAYER to pray? 7) Is there an ERROR to avoid (what can I learn from the mistakes of those in Scripture)? 8) Is there a TRUTH to believe? 9) Is there something for which to PRAISE God?

We are also Guilty of Bible Misinterpretation if we:

B. Use Scripture Against God by Not Letting the Bible as a Whole Speak to Us

If someone asked you why do you think God gave us the Bible, what would you say? Far too often the Bible is read in hopes of gaining comfort and assurance that God is on *our side* as we strive for the life we want for ourselves. But the Bible was given to us to place us on God's side as we strive for the life God wants for us! During the Civil war, a minister remarked to President Abraham Lincoln that he hoped "the Lord was on the Union's side." Lincoln responded with this sharp rebuke: "I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side." Do we live like this, believing God is only on our side to the extent we choose to follow what He tells us is right in the Bible? **Jesus** tells us, "'The one who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me'" (**John 14:21**).

The temptation is always to bend the Bible in our direction to excuse what *we* want to do or to believe what *we* want to believe. **I John 4:16** declares, "And we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love. . . ." Countless people have spun these words to condone marrying anyone we claim "we love" or to divorce someone "we no longer love," despite God's firm commands otherwise (**Malachi 2:13-16; Matthew 19:3-12; Romans 1:18, 24-27; I Corinthians 6:9-11; I Corinthians 7:10-24; 39-40**). Others quote "God is love" to deny Hell's existence or to believe most everyone eventually gains Heaven. They choose to ignore the many warnings found in the teachings of **Jesus** (as **Matthew 25:41-46; Mark 9:43-47**) and the Apostles about Hell as a place of "eternal destruction" and "flaming fire on those who don't know God and on those who don't obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (**II Thessalonians 1:7-10**). Or, people proclaim something like "God wants me to be happy" to excuse doing something they claim is

necessary to their happiness without any further need to ask God if this is what He wants. I have yet to find one verse in the Bible declaring God wants us to be "happy." The Bible does tell us, "But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do" (**I Peter 1:15**, NIV), which means we are to live as though we have been set apart by God to fulfill *His* will; not our will. We are also promised something much better by our Lord than mere "happiness"; it's "joy"! **Jesus** promised us in **John 16:24**: "Until now you have asked for nothing in My name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete." **Colossians 1:11** declares, (TLB): " We are praying, too, that you will be filled with His mighty, glorious strength so that you can keep going no matter what happens—always full of the joy of the Lord."

Perhaps the best way to avoid misinterpreting the Bible is to read it often and to read it through. Atheists and leftists often publicize a supposed quote of Thomas Jefferson to promote their ungodly agenda for our nation. Having read most of what Jefferson ever wrote, I can usually spot a fraudulent quote that is contrary to what he truly said and believed. The same can be true of us concerning the Bible. The more we become very familiar with the actual words of the Bible and what they reveal to us of God's heart, the less often we will be fooled by those who make false claims about what the Bible says or by what God means.

Ephesians 4:11-16 provides a good summary of today's sermon. Paul urges that we feed upon sound Biblical teaching to become mature enough to avoid being swept along by fads and falsehoods in Christian teachings: "¹⁴Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶Instead, we will lovingly follow the truth at all times—speaking truly, dealing truly, living truly—and so become more and more in every way like Christ. . ." (TLB).

CONCLUSION

Many years ago, a man in Kansas City was severely injured in an explosion. Baptist pastor and editor Robert L. Sumner tells the story of his friend in *The Wonder of the Word of God* (1969). The victim's face was badly disfigured. He lost his eyesight and both of his hands. He'd recently given his heart to **Jesus Christ**. He keenly felt the loss of no longer being able to read God's Word. Then he heard of a lady in England who read Braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in Braille. Much to his dismay, he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been destroyed by the explosion and could feel nothing. But one day, as he brought one of the Braille pages to his lips in a vain hope they might feel something, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters. He could feel them. Like a flash he thought, "I can read the Bible using my tongue"! At the time Robert Sumner wrote his book in 1969, this man had "read" through the entire Bible four times. How he would have envied our ability to hold, see, and read God's words in the Bible, and how he would have wondered if we have not diligently read through the Bible at least once, if not many times?