

How to Study the Bible

Week Five

March 15, 2009

Interpretation: Figurative
Language

*Elisha prayed, and said,
"LORD, I pray, open his
eyes that he may see."
(2 Kings 6:17)*



*His delight is in the law of the Lord, And in His law he meditates day
and night. He shall be like a tree Planted by the rivers of water, That
brings forth its fruit in its season, Whose leaf also shall not wither; And
whatever he does shall prosper. (Ps 1:2-3)*


Calvary Chapel
O F R O S W E L L

Review

We are in our Fifth class on How to Study the Bible! So far, we have discovered that real Bible Study always consists of three key aspects: **Observation**, **Interpretation**, and **Application**. Our goal is to become adept at specifically and intentionally focusing on each of these three in our Bible studies.

In our first study, we saw the vital place of making good **Observations**. Good observations are the building blocks and material for a good Bible study.

In our second and third weeks, we looked at the place of **Interpretation**. Interpretation is the science and the skill to determine what a passage means. This section of Bible study is the most technical, which is why it is our fourth week dealing with it. We have divided up our Interpretation into five basic areas of interpretation: Content, Context, Christ, Compare and Consult.

Today we want to add to these, or expand these areas of Interpretation by looking at some specific areas of Bible interpretation that require extra attention: figurative language, parables, Spiritual Meanings, Hebrew Poetry and Prophecy.

I honestly believe that much of what we talk about will come naturally the more you study the Bible. The place where you focus on these is during the interpretation phase—yet again, will often happen quite naturally. That being said, it is good to have a least a little bit of a clear understanding of what these areas are and how we approach them.

What is Figurative Language?

In most cases, figurative language can be seen as a “word picture”. The old adage tells us that “*a picture is worth a thousand words*”. The idea is that by allowing us to see something, it is far more clear and can communicate a greater depth than simple words could. Figurative language is a means of communicating that picture – in words.

Whenever you describe something by comparing it with something else, you are using figurative language. That is any language that goes beyond the literal meaning of words in order to furnish new effects or fresh insights into an idea or a subject. The following are some examples:

Simile

A figure of speech which involves a direct comparison between two unlike things, usually with the words “like” or “as”. Examples:

1 Peter 1:2, “*because ‘All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away,.’*”

Matthew 23:27, “*Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.*”

Metaphor

A figure of speech which involves an implied comparison between two relatively unlike things using a form of “be”. The comparison is not announced by “like” or “as”. Example:

Luke 13:32, Jesus said of Herod, “*Go tell that fox.*”

“*Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*” (1 Co 3:16)

Similitude

A drawn-out or prolonged simile. For example, Jesus contrasts the man who builds on the rock and the man who builds on the sand and likens them to obedient hearers and disobedient hearers. (Matt. 7:24-27).

Allegory

A figurative application of a story or narrative. This is a figurative sentence or discourse in which the principal subject is described by another subject resembling it in its properties and circumstances. Paul's stated allegory in Galatians 4:21ff is a classic in the New Testament. "*We as Isaac are children of promise and of the freewoman.*" Paul's description of the Christian armor in Ephesians 6:11-17 is listed in the standard works as an allegory. It is certainly worthy of study in our fight against sin and Satan.

Irony

A figure in which what is meant is the opposite of that which is stated. (Job 12:2). "*No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you.*" Elijah makes an ironical ridicule of the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27.

Sarcasm

A satirical remark uttered with scorn or contempt; a taunt; a gibe; a cutting jest. The soldiers kneeled before Jesus mocking him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!" It was bitter sarcasm.

Hyperbole

A manifest and impressive exaggeration for the purpose of expressing the full force and increasing the vividness of the subject presented. (Psalm 119:136). "*Streams of water run down mine eyes, because they observe not thy law.*"

Personification

A figure that clothes inanimate objects with the attributes of things animate. (Isa. 55:12). "*The hills shall break forth before you into singing; and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*"

Anthropomorphism

A figure which ascribes human features or elements of the human form to God. (1 Pet. 3:12). "*For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears unto their supplication: but the face of the Lord is upon them that do evil.*"

Now, you don't have to remember what all those are but I just wanted you to have a taste of what is before us. Just knowing that you will see figurative language is helpful.

How do we know when a passage is figurative?

As we study a passage, how do we know when we are supposed to interpret a passage figuratively and when we should interpret it literally? First, we need to understand that we should always look to the simple, straightforward meaning of language first. I believe you will be far ahead in Bible study if you always lean this way. You will make far less errors in interpretation by trying to take it literally than you will in taking it figuratively.

When should I take a passage figuratively?

1) If the passage or context tells us to take it figuratively. Often in the passage it will announce to us that it is using figurative language.

2) When the literal meaning of a word or sentence involves an impossibility.

3) If the literal makes a contradiction. When we interpret a figurative passage literally, it contradicts what is true, what the Bible says. For example, consider these two verses:

He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. (Ps 91:1)

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning. (Jas 1:17)

One verse says God has a shadow, under which we can abide. The other verse says God has no shadow. Is this a contradiction? NO! Neither are communicating anything about the makeup of God's physical person. These verses are using figurative language to communicate who God is. They tell us nothing about God actually possessing a shadow.

4) By the use of common sense! I say this kindly, but so many misunderstandings in figurative language are simple matters of common sense. It is obvious that it is figurative!

So, always seek to interpret a passage literally, unless you have very good reason not to do so.

Key to Understanding Figurative Language

One of the most important things I can tell you about figurative language is that God's intention is not to make things more complicated, but more clear!

Lets go back to our original description – “*A picture is worth a thousand words*”. The idea is that in a picture, we are able to communicate much more, much deeper than we could have through simple logic. God's intention is to communicate more clearly! He wants you to understand more, see and feel more than you could have otherwise.

Consider what Jesus tells us about one type of specific figurative language (that we will cover more on in a moment) - Parables.

Jesus told us why He used parables:

And the disciples came and said to Him, “Why do You speak to them in parables?” He answered and said to them, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: ‘Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (Mt 13:10-17)

What did Jesus just say? Many have taken this section to say that at this point in Jesus' ministry He began communicating in a “code” that only the enlightened could understand. Yet, that does not make sense, it is not consistent with God's character or ways.. Let's begin with His cross reference from Isaiah 6.

And in them the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled, which says: 'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, And seeing you will see and not perceive; For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them.' (Mt 13:14-15)

In context, what is being said? Isaiah saw the Lord, high and lifted up. During this awesome exposure to God, Isaiah was called to be God's messenger. Isaiah's response was his classic "*here am I send me*". Then God tells Isaiah what his ministry is going to be like. God tells him that he is going to cry out to the people, but they are not going to listen. Instead of turning them back to the Lord, it is going to harden their hearts.

Now, here is the question, is this Isaiah's fault? Was his message going to be too hard for them to understand? No! In fact, it would be very clear! Isaiah was going to clearly call them back to the Lord, but they would not listen, and it hardened them instead of turning them to the Lord.

In a similar way, often Pastors in messages will tell stories. Why do we do that? Is it to make the message more understandable or more confusing? Hopefully the answer is always to make things more clear. It is speaking in the most clear way you can. Good stories often help to illustrate a point and make it clear.

Therefore, this clarifies what Jesus is saying. Jesus was communicating in parables not to make it too hard for them to understand, but quite the opposite. He was bringing the teaching down to the lowest level, to the most simple of stories. The aim of parables is to grab people and help them to understand the truth. But for Jesus, like Isaiah, the opposite was happening. Even though He was going to all lengths to reach them and communicate to them, they were resisting and hardening their hearts.

The point I am drawing and wanting you to understand, is that the aim of parables and the aim of figurative language are to make things more clear. It is to appeal to them and open up truth to them.

So, when you come to figurative language, know this – God wants you to understand it!

Tools to Understand Figurative Language

So once we discover a passage we are studying is using figurative language and we understand God wants us to understand it – how do we rightly interpret it?

It means something

One of the dangers of figurative language is people make it to mean a million different things. One of the early things we understood in our aim to study the Bible is that it means something. Remember our passage in Peter – it does not have a private interpretation. One of the important things do in interpreting figurative language is to understand its one intended meaning. Then as much as your imagination is tempted to run away with you – don't! Keep it simple and understand its single and simple meaning.

Content

We need to know that figurative language is seeking to paint a word picture, that it is seeking to express a depth of emotion that goes even deeper than the words. Look for it, pay attention to it. Ask the question as to what it is seeking to communicate.

Context!

In a way, so many of the keys here are the same ones you are already using, but I just want to reemphasize them. Figurative language has a context, a purpose and place it is given. That context determines what it means. So, allow context to set the bounds of your interpretation.

Christ

Look for Jesus in the picture. This is not a “holy tortilla” thing, if you know what I mean. Rather it is the idea of allowing Jesus to shed light on the picture.

Compare

This is a very important part. Most often God clarifies word pictures in another place in the Bible. Pictures that He uses are ones that are defined in other places. Now again, understand – God is not seeking to be confusing. He is not changing the meanings constantly to keep us off base. No, there is a consistency throughout Scripture. For example, leaven is always a picture of evil and sin. Never, in any word picture painted, in any parable will it be something good. God does not want us to be confused. So

when you come across a piece of figurative language, use your resource tools – whether a computer or a concordance to see if that picture is found somewhere else.

Consult

Good commentaries will help shed some light on the picture that is being demonstrated. Such commentaries can help both historically and Biblically. But let me again say a word of warning: Watch out for commentaries that go overboard with figurative language and make it say more than it says. These are the commentaries that when you discover them – you should avoid them.

So, by looking at these tools – you discover there is nothing new. The same means of interpretation that you have been using all along apply here and even more so. I encourage you to see again the simplicity of this and the excitement that you can understand the passage before you!

Parables

Most often you can easily tell when a Parable is what you are studying, because it will tell you that it is a Parable. God will tell us it is a parable or say it is “like” this.

The first key to Parables is to understand that they have a simple and single meaning. One of the largest mistakes that people make is this. It is amazing to me how often people take a parable and make it mean so many things, but never understand the context and purpose it was given. You can twist parables so easily when you do this.

Imagine a pastor giving a message and using a story to illustrate a point. The word picture is seeking to shed light on a truth, an understanding. You cannot take the story out of the message, and make it mean anything you want – and then say it was what the pastor was teaching.

For example, say a pastor is teaching on marriage. He uses an illustration of a man buying his wife flowers, even though they cost so much. The point he was making is the gentle and caring demonstration of love. You could not go and tell someone that the pastor was talking about the evils of capitalism seen in the rising cost of flowers and the extortion of big businesses. No, that is not what he was saying, it was not the point, and it totally missed the message he was communicating. Some of that may be true and then again it may not – but one thing is for sure, it was not what the pastor was saying. In a similar way, people often come up with totally weird interpretations of parables, taking it completely out of the context it was given. What they come up with may be true or it may not be. But one thing is for sure it was not what God was saying in that passage. So, allow context to set the bounds of your interpretation

Second, Parables are meant to make things simple and not complex. Don’t try to make it confusing. Look for the simplicity in the passage

Third, remember that Parables illustrate truth.

The purpose of parables is to illustrate truth to us. Therefore, it is wrong to make a parable teach a truth that is not clearly communicated in scripture and especially in the surrounding context. This has been done so often in church history. But please, just understand that they are illustrations – not means of communicating some “new truth”.

Fourth, Consistency in Parables

One more key is to again talk about the Comparing part of Bible interpretation. This is a key in parables. It is sometimes called “parabolic consistency”. The idea is that the meaning behind something in one parable will be the same meaning in other parables.

For example, you might look at Matthew 13 which has a bunch of parables in it. In different places, he tells us what is behind the figures. Others we get from the rest of Scripture.

“Seed” in parables refers to the Word – it will always be so. So down in the parable of the Mustard seed – it has to do with the Word.

“The Birds of the air” are a picture of Satan and his work. So again, in the parable of the mustard seed when we see the birds in the branches, the birds are a picture of Satan having an inroad. They will not be a picture of something good.

“Leaven” is a picture of sin, it is all the way through the Bible. Therefore it cannot be something good, although some have tried to interpret the parable this way.

Summary on Parables

Holding onto these simple rules will help you greatly from misunderstanding parables and even better it will help you to understand what God is seeking to communicate to you! I pray you discover it!

Hebrew Poetry

Many passages in the Old Testament are written in Hebrew Poetry. Having a basic understanding of this can be helpful.

First of all, know this, that Hebrew Poetry and poetry in our day are quite different. Today, poems seek to communicate depth but do so through rhyme and meter. We use things like “Roses are red, violets are blue...” The aim is to rhyme.

Hebrew poetry is quite different. The aim is not to rhyme words, but to rhyme thoughts. It is not about how it sounds, but the flow of thoughts. This is exciting for us, because if it was based on rhyme and meter we would have little chance of understanding it in the English translation.

There are a lot of great books on Hebrew Poetry if you are interested in learning more than what is covered here. But a simple understanding is this. Phrases and understandings rhyme with each other in thought in what is called parallelism. It is one phrase or section rhyming with another in thought.

If it is not about rhyming then how do we know if we are reading Hebrew Poetry? Most modern translations have sought to help you out with this. If you will notice in your Bible, many of your passages are fully justified, much like this paragraph. But then other sections, like Psalms, Proverbs, and many parts of the prophets are indented and offset, like this:

*Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper. (Ps 1:1-3)*

When you see writing in your Bible like this, it is a hint from the translators that you are reading Hebrew Poetry.

How do we interpret Hebrew Poetry? The first thing is to simply understand that there are different types of Hebrew Poetry. Some of the basic types are these:

Synonymous Parallelism

An idea is expressed a second or third time. It is a repetition of the same thought in more ways. This takes a little practice to see but it will come easily the more you read Hebrew poetry.

As for man, his days are like grass;

As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.

For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more.

(Psa 103:15-16)

Synthetic Parallelism

Additions are made to the original concept. It is a building of an idea, adding to it, not just restating it – raising it higher.

Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psa 32:2)

Antithetic Parallelism

One idea contrasts with another thought. It is an opposite statement. One of the keys in this is that you need to see the balance between the two thoughts.

"Blessed is that man who makes the LORD his trust,

And does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies." (Psa 40:4)

It is not important that you remember these different designations but what is important is that you understand how it flows together. The major key in Hebrew Poetry is Context! If you take one side of a Hebrew Poem without considering the contrast then you may very well come up with an incorrect interpretation. Context, context, context! It is amazing how such a simple rule will save you again and again.

Once you see the context, ask why? Again, figurative language is meant to communicate more, to be a word picture. Hebrew Poetry is often aiming at emotion, a feeling. So the key is to look for it and to understand what it is showing you.

Spiritual Meanings

Many believe that every passage of the Bible has three meanings—

- First a Literal meaning
- Second a Practical meaning
- Third a Spiritual meaning

As I lay this before you, I would encourage you to be careful with this...lots of weird things have been taught by misusing this. Yet, I do want you to understand that God does communicate in His word with Spiritual meanings.

Think of it this way, each of the above approaches to the Bible are supported in the Bible. For example, as the New Testament looks back on the Old Testament—each of these views are supported.

It is literal—what is recorded in Scripture, Old and New Testament are real and literal events. The Bible is not Greek Mythology, it is true. Abraham, Noah, Jonah and Daniel for example—were all real men who really went through what the Old Testament says they did. Every passage is to be looked at literally.

It is Practical—God lets us know that one of the reasons that He recorded what He did is for our learning, and admonition.

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (1 Co 10:11)

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. (Ro 15:4)

We are to read the Bible with more than just getting the facts of the lives we read, but understanding that what God recorded, He did so to communicate a practical truth and lesson for us.

It is Spiritual—in this understanding, never taking away or dismissing the reality of the literal or practical meanings—there is often a spiritual picture in passages of the Bible. We see an example of this in Gal 4.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar (Ga 4:22-24)

Without getting into explaining the above verse, I just want you to notice the word symbolic. That is the idea here. There are events that God recorded in the Bible, and as He did so—He records a spiritual picture in the passage we are studying. I think of Passages like Genesis 22 and the sacrifice of Isaac and how many pictures there are in there of the Sacrifice of God’s Son, Jesus.

Types of Spiritual pictures

There are many kinds of “types” that you can and prayerfully will become more observant of in your Bible study. Here is a small list of some.

- Numbers—often numbers have a deeper meaning to them. Six being the number of man, seven being the number of fulfillment or completion.
- Names— can often have a deeper meaning. In Hebrews 7 it shows us that Melchizedek name has significant meaning. It literally means King of Righteousness. Thus picturing a character God wants us to see. Names like Jacob, Israel, and many more have meaning behind them.
- Colors—different colors have significant meanings, red, blue, black, etc
- Metals—Gold, silver, bronze—each of these have a consistent picture in the Bible.
- There are more....types, analogies and more.

So...how do we discover the Spiritual Meaning of a passage.

God never gives us a place where He gives us a chart that defines each spiritual picture. Thus discovering the meanings can be more work...and take greater study. Not everyone will agree with the types in Scripture and they should never be used accept illustratively of truth. Yet, I do believe we can discover the meaning of these spiritual pictures in the Bible.

How to discover Spiritual Meanings.

One key—is the rule of parabolic consistency or even figurative language consistency. As God uses a picture in one place, it means the same thing in other place. I believe God is masterful in doing this. If He was not consistent throughout the Bible, confusion would reign. I personally believe God maintains consistency of meaning in Spiritual pictures throughout the Bible.

At times God will give us a definition, like He does in Rev 13:18, telling us that “six” is the number of man. Thus, all through the Bible we see the “six” and how often it shows us the failing and falling short of man.

Other times, there is just consistency of representation. Every time a color, metal or number is used—it is used in the same way. Gold is always used of the furniture and such nearest God’s presence. Bronze is always used of things that deal with sin.

Again, this is not an exhaustive list—but it gives you a start. Part of the richness of spiritual meanings is that the more you study the Bible and the more familiar you become with it—the more it will open up to you and show you layers of wonderful, consistent truth.

Prophecy

What is prophecy? There are two basic definitions or types of prophecy. One is “fore-telling” and one is “forth-telling”.

Forth-telling prophecy is where a prophet will speak a prophecy, but the content is telling about the character of God or how He feels about a specific situation. The means for studying such prophecies is just according to the rest of scripture. In that definition, most of scripture falls under that heading.

Fore-telling prophecy is where God tells us about the future in advance. This is what we normally think of when someone mentions prophecy and will be the main focus of this section.

Why do we have Prophecy?

Prophecy is a proof that God is God

God says it this way to the false teachers and thus to the false gods:

“Present your case,” says the Lord. “Bring forth your strong reasons,” says the King of Jacob. “Let them bring forth and show us what will happen; Let them show the former things, what they were, That we may consider them, And know the latter end of them; Or declare to us things to come. Show the things that are to come hereafter, That we may know that you are gods; Yes, do good or do evil, That we may be dismayed and see it together. Indeed you are nothing, And your work is nothing; He who chooses you is an abomination. (Is 41:21-24)

To use the theological term, God is omnipresent. What that means is that God is present in all places and at all times at the same time. Perhaps another way to say that is that God is outside of time. That means He is as present today as He is 4,000 years ago at this very moment! That is hard for us to imagine and understand, but it is true.

God in this passage challenges the false gods to prove they are a god by telling the future in advance, to declare things to come. If they were omnipresent it would be easy to describe the future because they would already see it. Yet they cannot because they are not really gods. So God gives us prophecy almost as a calling card. He does so to prove that He is God and can be trusted.

“Remember this, and show yourselves men; Recall to mind, O you transgressors. Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things that are not yet done, Saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, And I will do all My pleasure,’ (Is 46:8-10)

Prophecy helps us to know God, to know Jesus

The most popular book of prophecy in our Bible is the book of Revelation. So many study it and argue over its meanings. Yet, God tells us its main point in its very first words:

The Revelation of Jesus Christ ...(Re 1:1)

The book of Revelation’s main point is to help us to see Jesus. The aim is to “reveal” who Jesus is! We see His work and eternity to come, but the aim is to see Him and understand more of Him. John stresses this again here:

And I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” (Re 19:10)

John shows us this emphasis by showing us his own failing. He shows us that he was tempted to fall at the feet of an angel. But that angel corrected him and directed him to Jesus. In many prophecy studies such a redirection is necessary. The aim is to see and to know Jesus.

Again a reminder. Perhaps you can see in this that if you force yourself to use the Bible study method I am teaching you or

perhaps a variation of it you would have asked – what does this show me about Christ? If that is what you do, then you will be safe in some of this misunderstandings.

Prophecy is a comfort to God's people

Part of the purpose of prophecy is to tell us what is to come in such a way as to comfort us now. As we see what God has in store for us in eternity, problems and issues here are set in their right context. As we understand what God is going to do, we gain comfort in the sorrows of this life.

Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1 Th 4:17-18)

So prophecy when rightly studied will be a comfort to God's people.

Prophecy gives us an understanding of the end of things

The psalmist found such an understanding as he saw what prophecy said was coming:

Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end. (Ps 73:17)

This is an important and vital principle. Many people argue so much about the timing of prophecies of things that are to come. I am of the opinion that God never laid out for us a blueprint in prophecy of what is going to happen in exactly what order. The real aim is to see the end of things. The aim is that as we see political things, financial things and all that is in this world we can look and see their end. We are able to see what God is going to do with the world. This is so important. I don't think it is vital that you have the whole layout of the tribulation in the book of revelation figured out. What I do think is vital is that you understand the issues of which God tells us about.

There can be a great comfort in this for some of you. As you seek to study prophecy you often find yourself confused trying to figure

out what happens at what point in time. I am not saying that you should not study it out and try to figure out what you can. But the main issue is that you understand the end of things.

Prophecy is to impact our lives

I suppose this should be a given at this point in our Bible study. One thing that we have continually stressed is that the whole of Bible study is aimed at Application. If we study without Application then we have missed the purpose and the point. Yet the sad reality is that many who study prophecy today have little or no application in their lives. The aim of understanding what is coming is that we can and should live differently.

The apostle John tells us about this effect:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 Jn 3:2-3)

When you really have the hope and the understanding of what is coming it will purify your life. That is the aim of Bible study and of prophecy.

So for review, the main purposes of Prophecy are these:

- Prophecy is a proof that God is God.
- Prophecy helps us to know God, to know Jesus.
- Prophecy is a comfort to God's people.
- Prophecy gives us an understanding of the end of things.

Prophecy is to impact our lives

Make these your aims when you study prophecy and you will be on the right track!

How do we study Prophecy?

Let's approach this by focusing on our five "C's". Keeping this pattern will help us to not get confused and it will also help us to see the value of the pattern we are using.

Interpreting Prophecy by Content

When we look at the content of a verse, we are focusing on the words that are before us. One of the things we have emphasized is that God is not trying to confuse us. Therefore as we interpret words we need to look for the simplest and most straightforward meaning. This is also true in prophecy.

Let's use a couple examples of how some prophecies have already been fulfilled.

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. (Is 7:14)

So what did this prophecy mean? Sometimes I imagine if I were in a Bible study on these passages before the fulfillment. I imagine if I heard this passage being taught the way some people teach prophecy today, perhaps their interpretation would go something like this:

"Here we see a virgin is prophesied. Yet a virgin is really a picture of a nation that has not yet gone to war. We see it used this way in such and such ancient writer. Yet here it says that nation will conceive. Conceive means to come together. This means this nation will join with another nation that does know war. Together they will start a new nation. That is what it means by a son. It will be like God being with them...."

Now of course, I am trying to be funny in this. Yet if you have sat through many prophecy teachings then you have heard just such things said about prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled.

But let's examine how this prophecy was fulfilled. It was fulfilled exactly as it was written. A virgin meant a virgin – Mary. A Son meant a Son, she would bear a Son, Jesus. And He is God with us, God in the flesh with us.

Do you see how simply and accurately this prophecy was fulfilled? Do you see how you could have just taken it literally and known it would happen just as simply and clearly as it was promised?

Let's look at another.

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting.” (Mic 5:2)

Again, I imagine myself hearing this taught in an Old Testament prophecy meeting....

“Here we see where the ruler of Israel is going to come from. It says that he will come from Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem literally means “a house of bread”. So here we see that he will come from a poor family. It says a little house of bread, so we know it will be a very poor family. So, if you want to be worthy of the Messiah, you need to give all your moneyto me.....”

Again, I am hoping to picture this in a funny way. Yet do you see how this can be used? Let's again notice, what did the prophecy promise? It says that Jesus would come from Bethlehem. How was it fulfilled?

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, (Mt 2:1)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem! The prophecy was fulfilled as simply as it was given.

Let's look at one more.

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zec 9:9)

Here it tells us how Jesus would come. How was it fulfilled?

Then they brought him to Jesus. And they threw their own clothes on the colt, and they set Jesus on him. (Lk 19:35)

The prophecy promised that the king would come on a donkey. How did Jesus come, how did He show Himself to Israel. He literally came riding on a donkey. It happened just as it was promised.

Now again, I could have fun with this and imagine if this prophecy were interpreted like many future prophecies are today.

“Here we see how the Messiah will come. He is coming on a donkey. Now as we all know the donkey is the symbol of the Democratic party. This is how we know Jesus will be a Republican. We know that in order for Jesus to come, you and I must vote Republican.....or it could be said the other way. Obviously here we see that Jesus will be riding on a Democratic ticket. Therefore if you want to be on Jesus' side you need to vote Democratic....

Do you see with me how dangerous such teaching can be? What we see is that Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled literally and simply. What happened is exactly what was said.

Now, if it were not so, if prophecy could be interpreted as loosely as my supposed examples above, do you see how you could twist Scripture to mean almost anything? No wonder so many people are confused when it comes to understanding prophecy.

So my first bit of advice is this, take it simply and as literally as

possible and you will be more right than you could imagine. For almost 1900 years people wrestled with prophecies about Israel being back in the land. Many commentaries tried to interpret some of those promises away. But obviously today you and I see that Israel is in the land. So if you lived in 400 AD and took the Bible literally that Israel would be back in the land, you would have been right! The point I am making is not to let what you see in the present world deter you from taking things literally. Just take them simply and literally and know that somehow that is what will be in place when that prophecy is fulfilled.

For me, this means when I see Babylon mentioned in Revelation, that I believe Babylon will be in existence and power as a nation again. Yet so many have tried to make Babylon mean so many things, including the United States. But I believe we are safe if we just keep our interpretations simple.

Interpret Prophecy in its Context

In each prophecy that we have in the Bible there is a context to that prophecy. To understand it, we need to see what questions it is answering or what contrasts it is giving. Again, this always vital. I could give a lot of examples but I think just the reminder here is enough.

Interpret Prophecy in seeing Christ

Again, I noted this above. The purpose of prophecy is to show us Jesus. He is the very spirit of prophecy. So as we look at things that are told to us of things that are to come, ask what this shows you about Jesus.

Interpret Prophecy by Comparing it with other Scripture

This is a very important issue in studying prophecy so we will take a moment to explore it. One of the basic premises again is to know that God is not trying to confuse us. Therefore if we find one passage confusing, it is likely that He explains this in another place.

This is so important in prophecy. Prophecy becomes the most “Biblical” of studies. I don’t know how to communicate that more clearly, but to say that prophecies draw often from other

prophecies. Therefore to really understand a prophecy, we will gain that understanding in the rest of the Bible. The more we know the whole Bible, the better our understanding of prophecy will be.

Let's take the book of Revelation for example. There are tons of pictures and illustrations used in Revelation. Yet every one of them is found in Scripture. The book of Revelation becomes far easier to understand when we look to the rest of the Bible for clues as to what it means.

For example, in Revelation we see this picture:

Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars. (Re 12:1)

What does it mean? Well, if we were left to interpret it ourselves we could come up with a lot of wild interpretations, including the Catholic church or Mary. Such interpretations, by the way, have been tried by the Catholic church itself for hundreds of years. But that is not what this passage is referring to. So where do we figure out what is being alluded to?

We have to go to the Bible to explain the picture. It is found back in Genesis 37:9-10 in a vision that Joseph has, seeing this exact picture. Jacob interprets it for us as a picture of Israel, all his brothers, and thus eventually all of Israel. So who is the woman – the woman is Israel!

Another example.

And I saw in the right hand of Him who sat on the throne a scroll written inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals. (Re 5:1)

What is this scroll? It does not tell us in Revelation 5. So how do we determine what it is referring to?? I have heard many things through the years. Probably one of the most common is that it is a "Title deed to the earth". I have heard this taught by even some of the most respected teachers. Yet, can I be so bold as to tell you that this is not what it means. We never see a picture like that

interpreted as a title deed anywhere in the Bible. So where do we find the understanding for this? We look back to the book of Zechariah:

Then I turned and raised my eyes, and saw there a flying scroll. And he said to me, "What do you see?" So I answered, "I see a flying scroll. Its length is twenty cubits and its width ten cubits." Then he said to me, "This is the curse that goes out over the face of the whole earth: 'Every thief shall be expelled,' according to this side of the scroll; and, 'Every perjurer shall be expelled,' according to that side of it." (Zec 5:1-3)

Zechariah shows us that this scroll is a picture of God's judgment coming, of every sin being dealt with. So now we know, this scroll is God's judgment on sin, how He will deal with every sin.

Why does God do it this way? I have a sense that He is showing us that the understanding of prophecy must be based on the rest of the Bible. Further, it is almost a bonus for the real Bible student. One who studies the whole Bible will find himself or herself gaining a clearer understanding of prophecy. In a sense, it is a code for those who take His word seriously - not one that is meant to be confusing, but one that calls us to study all of the Bible.

So when you find a picture in prophecy you don't understand, look for it in the rest of the Bible. If you can't find it right away, file it away and pray, wait on God and as you continue to study the Bible, you will find it in your reading and understand the things God is trying to tell you.

Interpret Prophecy by Consulting other resources.

Looking at good commentaries can be a great help in this. Yet, I find myself wanting to offer a caution. There is no place in Scripture where good commentators differ more than the understanding of prophecy. This is true for many reasons, some of which can be seen in what I have written above. Many approach prophecy from the wrong angles and wrong preconceptions. The point is, that even good commentators will disagree with each other

widely. Don't let this discourage you. Just know it is true. I believe that if you take the Bible simply and interpret it in light of the rest of the Bible you will likely be ahead of many commentaries. So, please do look at other commentaries, but don't lock yourself into them. Be aware of the wide differences in people's interpretations.

Let me add one more thing at this point. Let the Bible be your authority on prophecy. Many people come up with a view of prophecy and then look at all prophecy through that view. They seek to force everything into that mold. This happens in prophecy probably more than any other area of Bible study. I challenge you, let Scripture be your guide. Where it is clear, take it and accept it. Let it and not some theory be your guide to understanding the future. Don't lock into someone else's ideas. Hold to the Bible!

Technical Notes on Prophecy

There are a lot of good resources that will take you more into depth on studying prophesy if you are interested. I would be glad to give you a list concerning specific areas that you are interested in. But before we finish our overview of this, I want to cover just two technical notes here that are often confusing to us in prophecy.

Dual Fulfillment of Prophecy

One of the aspects that God has built into many prophecies is what we call a "dual fulfillment". What that means is that the prophecy can be literally fulfilled and yet still have a further, even deeper fulfillment later in God's plan.

Consider this example:

For ships from Cyprus shall come against him; therefore he shall be grieved, and return in rage against the holy covenant, and do damage. "So he shall return and show regard for those who forsake the holy covenant. And forces shall be mustered by him, and they shall defile the sanctuary fortress; then they shall take away the daily sacrifices, and place there the abomination of desolation. (Da 11:30-31)

In chapter 11 of Daniel, we have some amazing prophecies of things that were coming in Daniel's day. The events Daniel prophesied about were still hundreds of years in the future for him. Yet they are history for us, and amazingly so in their accuracy. Again, this is a proof of God's person, because He foretold the future in advance. What is prophesied in these verses concerned Antiochus Epiphanes or Antiochus IV, who in 168BC attacked Jerusalem. Antiochus took out his frustration on the Jews, the city of Jerusalem, and their temple. He vented his fury against the holy covenant, the entire Mosaic system (cf. v. 28), favoring any renegade Jews who turned to help him (cf. v. 32). He desecrated the temple and abolished the daily sacrifice. Antiochus sent his general Apollonius with 22,000 soldiers into Jerusalem on what was purported to be a peace mission. But they attacked Jerusalem on the Sabbath, killed many people, took many women and children as slaves, and plundered and burned the city.

In seeking to exterminate Judaism and to Hellenize the Jews, he forbade the Jews to follow their religious practices (including their festivals and circumcision), and commanded that copies of the Law be burned. Then he set up the abomination that causes desolation. In this culminating act he erected on December 16, 167 b.c. an altar to Zeus on the altar of burnt offering outside the temple, and had a pig offered on the altar.

This is what Daniel again prophesied as the Abomination of Desolation. So the prophecy was fulfilled literally and exactly back in 167 b.c. So it is all done right? Well, not exactly. Jesus, two hundred years after that said this:

“Therefore when you see the ‘abomination of desolation,’ spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place” (whoever reads, let him understand), “then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. (Mt 24:15-16)

So although Daniel's prophecy was fulfilled literally in 167 b.c., it has a dual fulfillment, for the Antichrist will do it again in the middle of the Tribulation.

The point of this is for us to understand that prophecy can be fulfilled more than one time. I hope that is not too confusing, but it may be something you come across.

Perhaps you may ask why God does it this way. He never tells us in Scripture why He does it this way, but it is clear He does. Perhaps it is so that in previous encounters like with Antiochus we can see a “dress rehearsal” of what is coming. That these early fulfillments can be even a greater warning of what is coming.

Perhaps you find yourself wondering, since we said that we take prophecy literally. Is this less than literal? No! The Antichrist will fulfill it in exactly the same way. It will happen literally...again. So you can still take it literally. Just part of your frustration may be when you study a prophecy and you want to know if it is past tense and already fulfilled or future tense of something we are expecting that the answer may very well be both! J

Prophetic Perspective in Prophecy

What this means is that some prophecies lump large sections of time together. Some will talk about things that Jesus did in His first coming and what He will do in His second coming right next to each other.

Consider this example from Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, Because the Lord has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.” (Is 61:1-3)

Now, when Jesus began His ministry, He entered the synagogue in Nazareth and read from this exact prophesy:

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the

book, He found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:16-21)

Do you see what Jesus did? He showed that only the first part of the prophecy would be fulfilled in His first coming. Yet the difficult thing is that the break happens right in the middle of a sentence. Let me put the Isaiah passage back and notice where Jesus stopped reading:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, Because the Lord has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified." (Is 61:1-3)

The very next phrase speaks of His coming to judge and bring vengeance that will take place at the second coming. But the perspective of the prophecy ignores the timing and focuses instead on the reality of all that Christ did and will do. Now, as you can imagine, if you are trying to determine the timing of this promise in Isaiah, you may very well get it wrong. It is through this that we can see why many of the Jews struggled with Jesus at His first coming because they were expecting the entire work of God... although mostly focusing on the judgment that He would bring on the world.

If you were reading Isaiah back 3,000 years ago and were trying to interpret this passage you would be able to understand what the Messiah would accomplish but may be confused as to when it would be accomplished. What we see is that God in prophecy is more concerned that we understand the “reality” of what He is going to do than the “timing” of when He is going to do it.

Let’s apply that just briefly looking forward. It may also be that some of the prophecies of what God is going to do are not always organized by timing. We may not know if He is going to do it at the Rapture, Second Coming or in the Millennium. But what you will know is the reality of what will happen. Now, I don’t know if that frustrates you. But for me, I am thrilled just to know the things that God will do, if I am confused on the timing, it is not as important.

So just understand, there are places where God groups large sections of time in one prophetic perspective.

The Need of the Holy Spirit

What I want to say here is a quick reminder. It is something we have said throughout the study and yet it would not be without importance if we had mentioned it every single time.

One of the keys in interpreting the Bible is the need we have of the Holy Spirit to open it up to us. We talked early on how in 1 Cor 2 it tells us that the natural man and the natural mind cannot understand the Word. We need the Holy Spirit to help us!

I love how Jesus emphasizes over and over in the first few chapters of Revelation this with this saying:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. . .” ’ (Re 2:7)

As we study prophecy, we need to cry out to the Holy Spirit to give us understanding. Sadly, many turn first and with greater emphasis to prophecy teachers and prophecy books. But God tells us to turn to Him...and it is what I urge you to do....*to hear what the Spirit is saying!*

