

Lesson 22 Reading

Now we need to see some of the principles in interpreting the Bible. If we want to study the Bible, we have to understand the Bible. In order to understand the Bible, we need to interpret it. If there is no interpretation and no explanation, naturally we will have no way to understand the Bible. We know everything has its own principles. The more esteemed and important a matter is, the stricter are its governing principles and laws. If a matter is of no significance or importance and can be carried out in any way, there will not be any laws, principles, and regulations to speak of. But if a matter is proper, and it occupies a definite place and significance, and if it is great and noble, surely there are principles and laws governing it; one cannot carry it out haphazardly.

The Bible is an extremely great item in the universe. Besides our Lord and God of glory, I believe that the greatest item in the universe is the Bible we have before our eyes and in our hands. Since the Bible is so important, we need the proper interpretation before we can study or understand it. This interpretation must be governed by definite rules, laws, and principles. We cannot interpret it in this or that or any way we like.

All rules are a kind of protection. If a train has no railroad tracks to run on, not only will it be unable to run smoothly, but it will also be without protection. When there are railroad tracks, the train will move smoothly and will have the proper protection. This is the same way with the study of the Bible. If one studies the Bible and expounds it blindly and carelessly, the result will be inconceivable and even dangerous. Our thoughts are often without restraints. If we want to study the Bible properly and understand it accurately, there must be the restrictive interpretation.

The first principle is to interpret and understand the Bible as literally as possible. We have to grasp firmly the fact that when God inspired men to write the Bible, He used words that are fully comprehensible to man. When we attempt to understand the Bible today, we must understand the thought of God strictly and accurately according to the letter of the words. We should not think that since the Bible is inspired by God, it will always transcend human language and is therefore open for spiritual interpretation. This is a dangerous proposition. We should interpret the Bible according to the literal meaning of the words. No matter how difficult or out of place a literal interpretation appears to us, we have to adhere strictly to the literal meaning.

An obvious example of this is the Old Testament prophecy in Isaiah concerning the Lord Jesus being born of a virgin. Today the Lord has already been born of a virgin. It is therefore no surprise to us when we read and hear this word. But at the time of Isaiah,

when men read what he wrote concerning a virgin bearing a child and calling his name Emmanuel, would they not have had difficulty in their mind? A person would certainly have difficulty in understanding how a virgin can be with child. Some could have turned to a spiritual interpretation, suggesting that the virgin could mean something else rather than an actual virgin. But when this prophecy was fulfilled, it was fulfilled literally. The virgin referred to is an actual virgin.

Another point is that one has to consider carefully whether a passage should be interpreted literally or spiritually. There is a big difference there. Many times we must go beyond the letter, history events, and persons and things to explore and to receive the revelation of life. In order to study the Bible, we must go beyond the letter. For example, the Seventh-day Adventists hold on to the letter in the Bible: "Remember the Sabbath day so as to sanctify it" (Exo. 20:8). The letter requires people to keep the Sabbath, but the spiritual meaning of keeping the Sabbath is that God wants whoever is laboring and is burdened to obtain rest. Hence, it is not a matter of keeping the letter but of receiving the Spirit. According to the spiritual meaning, the Sabbath is the rest that God has established for those who are heavily burdened, and this Sabbath is just the Lord Christ. It is not surprising that the Lord said, "Come to Me all who toil and are burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). This is today's Sabbath. Similarly, regarding the matter of circumcision, to require people to be circumcised on the eighth day is merely the letter. The spiritual meaning of circumcision is to terminate our flesh, to deny our natural life.

Although Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and Hagar, Abraham's concubine, did not have positive histories, Paul went beyond the historical facts to see the revelation contained within them. He spoke of these two women as two covenants. Galatians 4 reveals that Sarah, the wife of Abraham, represents the covenant of grace, whereas Hagar symbolizes the covenant of law. From this we can see that in the Bible the position of the law is like that of a concubine, whereas the position of grace is like that of the real wife. The Bible is mysterious. We all must go beyond the historical events and persons in order to see the revelation of life hidden within them.

In interpreting the Bible, we have to pay attention to one more thing: one portion of the Word is not sufficient to represent the whole truth. In other words, there is no truth that can be fully explained in a single portion of the Word. Therefore, in reading and interpreting the Bible, we should pay attention to the words again, it is written. This is the word spoken by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 4:7. When the Lord was tempted, the devil quoted to the Lord the words in Psalm 91 that God would give charge to His angels to bear Him up, lest He dash His foot against a stone. The devil argued that He could jump from the top of the temple and would not be hurt because there is such a promise in the Old Testament. This is how the devil tempted the Lord Jesus with an isolated

passage of the Old Testament. When the Lord heard that, He answered right away, "Again, it is written, 'You shall not test the Lord your God.'" This shows us that we cannot consider one isolated portion of the Bible alone. Instead, we must consider two, three, or more portions of the Word together. We should consider both sides and even all sides. No single portion of the Bible can represent the whole truth, in the same way that no one face of a house can represent the whole house completely.

The truths of the Bible are not written and presented in an orderly sequence. Instead, these truths are here and there, scattered, throughout the Bible (cf. Isa. 28:13). The Bible is like a great jigsaw puzzle with many small parts, but all these parts are scattered. The Bible does not arrange the truths in a certain sequence, putting the parts together to present a full and perfect picture. We have to gather the many parts of a truth to see it in a complete way. In your study you may have picked up ten parts, but none of these parts are connected to one another. Every part stands by itself. You need to spend time to collect more parts of the puzzle and put them together gradually. If we intend to put a jigsaw puzzle together, we must first see the picture. With the picture in our mind, we can put all the pieces of the puzzle together correctly.

Discussion Questions:

1. What point stuck out to you the most from the lesson overview?
2. Explain the difference between literal and spiritual interpretation.
3. How is the Bible like a jigsaw puzzle? How does having a big picture of what the Bible is all about guide our interpretation of the Bible?
4. What do you find hardest about understanding the Bible?