

How to Study Your Bible: Interpretation

Selected Scriptures

90-157

Well, we are continuing in our series on how to study the Bible, or how to get the most out of your Bible. We've laid down a lot of preliminary things to elevate your confidence and whet your appetite with regard to studying the Scripture. We've talked about who can study the Bible with effectiveness, who can truly and rightly interpret Scripture. And we told you that the Word of God says that only those who are born again, only those with a strong desire, who are diligent, who are pure and holy, who are obedient, and prayerful are able to rightly divide the Word of truth.

And so we depend upon the work of the Holy Spirit in all of those areas. The Spirit who gives us new life, the Spirit who plants in us the hunger for the truth, the Spirit who grants to us the diligence and who cleanses us from sin and drives us toward holiness, the Spirit who works obedience in us, the Spirit who prompts us to pray is behind all of these requirements and qualifications for the study of God's Word.

Now, given that we understand the importance of the Word of God, that it is in fact the Word of God, and we've endeavored to say that in a number of ways in the last couple of weeks, and given that our lives are right before the Lord, we belong to Him, we have this desire, this diligence, this holiness, this commitment to obedience and prayerfully approach the Word of God, how are we then to study Scripture? How are we to get a grip on this book?

It seems so formidable. It's such a thick book, such a long book. In fact, 66 books make up this one book. There are so many details and since every word, therefore every phrase and every sentence and every paragraph, every chapter, every book itself is of such vital importance, how are we ever to be able to grasp the fullness of the Word of God? What format do we use? What approach do we use for effectively studying the Bible?

And I want to share with you just some of the basic things that are essential in coming to grips with an understanding of the Word of God. Some of them will be familiar to you and some of them perhaps will be new to you. Suffice it to say, by way of a little bit of an introduction, one of the grave problems in the church today is a misunderstanding of the meaning of Scripture.

As I said to you this morning, we...and even last Sunday night...we expect unbelievers to misinterpret Scripture, don't we. Because they are natural and they cannot understand the things of God, the Bible in its truth is closed to them. For the Bible is only understood by those who are taught by the Spirit of God. And since they are void of the Spirit and void of the life of God, we don't expect unbelievers to come up with the right answer.

But it is also true that in many cases there are believers, who for a number of reasons misinterpret

Scripture. They come to Scripture with their presuppositions and force the Bible to conform to those presuppositions. They come to the Scripture with their predigested theology and their understanding of doctrine perhaps from the past, and they want to force the Word of God into that. Or perhaps they are enamored by some prominent teacher or prominent writer, and they sort of line up with that individual and they want to affirm what he says or what that group says without regard for a careful understanding of Scripture.

There has been, obviously, severe damage done to the work of God, severe damage done to the church of Jesus Christ by misinterpretation of Scripture. And there are so many misinterpretations of Scripture under the name of Christianity that most non-Christian people assume that there is no right interpretation of the Bible. Is that not fair to say? Most non-Christian people would say, "Well it's everybody's own interpretation. That's obvious because there are so many views." And that is a rather strange thing because for the most part if you are, for example, a Muslim, you are locked in to a pretty clear-cut common view of Muslim authoritative writings. And they're pretty much universally accepted and understood in the same way.

If you are a Mormon, there are not a lot of variations in how the Scriptures are interpreted and what doctrines are believed. If you are a Jehovah's Witness, the same would be true. If you're in Christian Science or any other of the quasi-Christian cults, there is much greater uniformity. Even within the Roman Catholic Church there is much less confusion about what the church teaches than there is in evangelical and true Christianity.

And one of the reasons why, during the Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic Church didn't want the people to have the Bible, one of the reasons why they never put the Scripture in the hands of the people for the period of time from say 500 to 1500, the period known as the Dark Ages, was because they were afraid that if the people got a hold of the Scripture without the skill and the preparation to rightly interpret it, they would misinterpret it. And we understand that fear because that, in fact, is the case. While they still had a responsibility to put the hand...the Scripture in the hands of the people, it was a correct assumption that when given the Word of God people would come up with all kinds of misinterpretations.

However, on the other hand it was an incorrect assumption that only the church could be the authoritative interpreter of Scripture, only the Roman Catholic system had the right to be the interpreter. That too was a wrong assumption. The right assumption is you give the Word of God to the people and then you teach the people how to rightly divide the truth. You don't keep it back from them. But it is true that the Bible in the hands of people can be the source of truth or the source of confusion, even within the framework of the church.

The church has come up with all kinds of very strange doctrines because of misinterpretations. In fact, bizarre kinds of things have occurred in the life of the church because of a misinterpretation of the Word of God. Cults have risen, as you know, throughout history because of misinterpretation. Very often misinterpretation, categorically codified, and defined by singular people like Mary Baker Eddy in the case of the Christian Science, or special vision, supposedly, come to Joseph Smith in the case of the Mormons. And those being then the interpretation or the appropriate interpretation of Scripture.

But not just through those mystical means. There still are today many Christian people who...who offer an interpretation or an understanding of Scripture that is utterly inaccurate. Their influence

varies, some of those people never get any influence outside their own house, for which we can be thankful to some degree. Others of them have wide influence. They're printed, they're put in books. Their books are widely distributed and the chaos reigns from pillar to post.

We really understand that. We know there is much confusion. In fact, I've told you many times. I don't need to point it out again, except to comment on it very briefly, that we live in a time in the framework of evangelicalism where to say this is the right interpretation and all these are wrong is viewed as unspiritual, unloving, ungodly, because even Christians have come to the conclusion that almost anything goes in interpreting the Bible.

We're supposed to tolerate people who believe on the cross, for example, that Jesus became a sinner and had to go to hell and suffer for His sins. We're supposed to be able to embrace those people as our Christian brothers and tolerate that. We're supposed to be able to embrace as Christians those people who believe that one is saved by baptism and apart from being dunked in water one cannot go to heaven. We're supposed to embrace people who believe that they make a contribution to their salvation, that it is grace but it is grace cooperating with human works that effects redemption.

We're supposed to embrace those people and call them our brothers and sisters, and to do anything less than that is ungodly and unloving and unbiblical and not Christlike. We're supposed to embrace people who completely misrepresent and misunderstand the significance of inspiration, who do not understand that the Bible is the end of all revelation and who misinterpret the ministry of the Holy Spirit. And we're to embrace them unequivocally and without question, and to question their misinterpretation of those things is somehow to undermine the unity of the church.

That's the mood of today, and it is not a mood in which careful Bible interpretation is likely to flourish is it? Because careful Bible interpretation is by nature divisive because if you come to a right conclusion about the Scripture then everything else is wrong. And so it's not a time for this from the standpoint of the mood of Christianity today. But it certainly is a time for this from the standpoint of God who commands us to know His Word and to rightly divide it. We are called to a proper understanding of Scripture so that we can truly understand God's message, so that we can put it into practice, believe it, and live it.

We are also to understand God's Word, because when believing it, living it, and putting it into practice we therefore bring upon ourselves the fullness of God's blessing and we have the opportunity to give Him the glory His name is due. Any misinterpretation of Scripture short circuits God's intended purpose for it. And you cannot justify that on any grounds whatsoever. So we are commended again to the study of the Bible.

Now let's just talk about some basic things that are necessary. And I'll review one that I gave you a week ago and then we'll go on to others. To understand the Scripture the first thing you have to do is read the Bible. Now that may come as a shock to you but it's where you have to start. Most people don't know what the Bible means because they don't know what it says. And maybe there are people who sort of stand at a distance from Scripture and say, "Boy, I could certainly never figure this deal out so I'm not even going to try." Nothing could be further from the truth.

Perhaps if we asked people who have some familiarity with the Bible, "What would be the most

difficult book in the Bible? What would be the hardest book of the Bible to understand?" they would probably say Revelation. Probably most people would say that the book of Revelation is hard to understand. I know many preachers, who throughout the life of their ministry, would never preach on the book of Revelation because they don't think they can understand it. And that's because they have abandoned the proper hermeneutics to interpret it. Because if they interpret it with the right hermeneutics they have to interpret it literally, and if they interpret it literally it goes against their historic theology. And they really don't want to do that so they just don't know what to do with the book of Revelation and they leave it out.

But most people would say it's probably the most difficult book to understand. Yet at the beginning of this book it says in chapter 1 verse 3, "Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy and heed the things which are written in it for the time is near." You want a blessing? Read Revelation. Listen to what it says, understand what it says, and put it in practice.

Now I believe that the book of Revelation can be understood. It can be understood if you just read it; it's very clear what it says. It's only when people get mystical about it that it becomes confusing. Obviously there are some elements of the prophecies there that we will never understand until they actually come to pass, but that's true of all prophecy. But the message of the book, exalting Jesus Christ, speaking about the glorification of the saints and the judgment of the ungodly is very clear in the book of Revelation.

You start by reading the Bible. I suggested to you that the way to do that is to read the Bible on a repetitious basis. Turn in your Bible, if you will, to Isaiah chapter 28. And I want to just set down a principle here that I think is very basic and very important. Isaiah chapter 28. I suppose that if you were to ask the Jews of Isaiah's day where they were on the scale of spiritual maturity, they would put themselves fairly high, having received the oracles of God, having the law of God, and having the various holy writings that had been granted to them and the words of the prophets that had come to them.

And, certainly, included in that is the preaching ministry of Isaiah. The people of Israel would have fancied themselves as students of the revelation of God, students of the Old Testament revealed Scripture. They would have fancied themselves as those who had the knowledge of God, and the wisdom of God, and understood God and His truth.

But that was not the way God viewed it. God viewed them not as mature but as utterly immature. He viewed them not as adults in terms of understanding but as infants in terms of understanding. And so Isaiah speaks to them in that sense in chapter 28 verses 9 and 10. "To whom would He teach knowledge and to whom would He interpret the message? – " speaking of God – "those just weaned from milk, those just taken from the breast. For he says – " verse 10 – 'order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there.' Indeed He will speak to this people."

Now when God went about to speak to His people Israel through the prophet Isaiah, He had to speak to them as if they were just infants, as if they had just been weaned from the breast, as if they had just been weaned from milk. They were infants and they had to be treated like infants. And how do you teach an infant? How do you instruct an infant in knowledge? How do you teach a child when they're in their infancy, when they're just beginning to have the capacity to learn? You teach them this way. "Order on order, order on order, line on line, line on line, a little here, a little there."

The bottom line, repetition, simple repetition. Repetition, over and over and over and over again is how little ones begin to learn. That's how God's people have to learn. You come into the Kingdom of God, as it were, according to Matthew 18, if we can spread this metaphor across to the New Testament. You come in as a child, you are a child of God, and you have certain childlike characteristics. One of them is that you need to learn the truth of God and you have to learn it by repetition. It's true of anything you learn. You learn it by repetition.

Even as a student in seminary...I go back to the days when I was endeavoring to pass exams in seminary and show my proficiency in the various course work that I had to do, and perform at a level so that I could get the grade I wanted to get and proceed toward my graduation. And I found that the only way that I could really retain what was necessary to retain was by constant memorization, constant repetition in my study. That's how we all learn. You learn by repetition, over and over and over and over.

And as you read the Bible, that is what will happen. I suggested to you that with regard to the New Testament in particular, you read it repetitiously. Read the same section every day for thirty days. Take about seven chapters or so, sometimes a little more, maybe a little less. If you're reading a book like Philippians that only has four chapters, then read four chapters every day for 30 days. If you're reading a book like John, divide it into three sections of seven; read seven for 30 days, the next seven for 30, the next seven for 30. In two and a half years you can do the entire New Testament that way. That repetitious reading will cause you to remember what you have read.

Now you say, "Well as I go through the Old Testament, do I do the same?" No, just read through it in a narrative fashion. And when you're done, go back and read through it again. And then go back and read through it again. You cannot remember the vast volume of detail and the wideness of the Old Testament. But I remind you of this, that the themes of the Old Testament and the themes of the New Testament are very clear and there are not that many of them. Do you remember what I told you were the basic themes of Scripture? First of all, Scripture is God's self-disclosure. It tells us about God.

So as you read through the Scripture, you can start at Genesis and read right through the Old Testament, noting in your mind everything that is true about God. And you'll find things repeated again and again and again, that God is wise and God is powerful and God is the creator and God is a judge, and God is just and God is merciful and demonstrates loving kindness. You see it here, you see it there, you see it here, you see it there. And so there is a repetition of that throughout the Old Testament. Every book doesn't unveil some brand new kind of revelation heretofore never known, but rather unfolds, in a new way, in a new environment, in a new context, in a new experience the character of God so that you are hearing about God over and over and over and over again.

Secondly we said that the Bible points out that God has a law which man violates, and as a result of that he suffers the cursing of God. Violation of God's law, disobedience to God brings cursing. That is clear in the Scripture. You'll start in Genesis and you'll see it immediately in the fall. You'll see it again and again and again and again as you go through the record of the Old Testament. Everywhere you go you're going to run into the same basic theme, illustration after illustration after illustration.

Thirdly we said that to those who keep the law of God and obey the law of God there is promised blessing. You will see that repeated again and again and again. Where there is the honor of God, the worship of God, where the sinner recognizes his sin and comes to God and seeks to glorify Him and honor Him, believes in Him, trusts in Him, and obeys Him, there will be blessing. Repeatedly in the Old Testament that record is unfolded.

The fourth great theme of the Old Testament is there is a Savior coming. Man is in desperate need. He is guilty before a holy God because of his sin. He can't do anything about it himself. Someone must come to pay the penalty for man's sin. That someone will come and that is the Savior. When you're reading in Genesis, you will read about one who will come and bruise the serpent's head. You will read about a ruler who will come who will be Shiloh, as it were, who will bring peace. As you move through you will read about the sacrificial lamb and you will read about a day of atonement. You will read about a scapegoat that bore away sin. All of that picturing the coming Savior.

And then the psalmist will begin to identify the Savior and even quote what the Savior will say when He hangs on the cross. And then you will read the prophets, and they will predict things about the Savior, about His birth, about His life, about His death, about His resurrection, and so it goes. And the Savior will be that recurring theme again and again and again and again, the one who is to come, the one who is to come.

And finally, the final fifth great sweeping reality of the Old Testament is that history will end with God establishing an earthly kingdom in which His glorious Savior will rule and reign. You will find that again and again and again and again. God will take back the earth. Paradise will be regained.

Those are the five great themes that sweep through the Old Testament, and, of course, through the New Testament as well. So when you read the Old Testament, just keep reading and reading and reading, you can hang everything you read on those five hooks. So there is repetition. There are just those few themes in the Bible. And those themes obviously have various shades and significances and nuances, and they break open into a myriad of truths. But they all are built around those themes. Reading the Bible will put you in touch and make you familiar with those themes and the man explicit statements about those themes, the many illustrations of those themes in the history that God has recorded for us in the Old Testament.

Another thing about the Old Testament in your reading is that the Old Testament is simple. And I say that in this sense. The Hebrew language is simple. It is a concrete language. It is not an abstract language like Greek. Greek has many abstractions. Greek is a language of cognition where Hebrew is a language of action. The Hebrew language is very specific, very concrete, very clear. And most of the terminology has very concrete and obvious significance. You should be able to read the Old Testament and understand what is going on.

You may run across a word you don't understand, you may run across a ceremony you don't understand, you may run across a historical event that maybe is a little bit confusing to you. But, in general, the language of the Hebrew is simple and straightforward. And as you read through the Old Testament, continually...and I would suggest that you read mostly in the same version, occasionally reading a different version for just a little bit of a nuance of understanding, but mostly in the same version so that you increase your familiarity with the text. Read the Scripture.

Now as you read...and this is what I've always done. As you read, keep a little bit of a log alongside your reading and note the things you don't understand. Note the things you don't understand. Don't get bogged down in your reading with everything you don't understand as you're just reading through. Keep reading and start making a list. Put down a little list for each book you're reading. Put down the chapter heading and start writing down the things that you don't understand, and you'll begin to sort of feed your curiosity a little bit. That's a very important process to do. Read and note the things you don't understand for future study so that you can go back and dig a little bit more deeply.

Now in the New Testament, as you're reading what I told you to do was take a little three by five card, or some kind of a card, a little Post-It or whatever you want to use, and write down the theme of every chapter. Write down the theme of every chapter. You're reading through 1 John, you're reading through the chapters of 1 John, five chapters, you give a little heading to each of those five chapters which plants in your mind what's in that chapter. Memorize that the 30 days you're reading 1 John. Keep it in your memory, go back and rehearse it, and you'll always know where things are in the Bible. You can find them easily. There's no substitute for this.

It's almost impossible to calculate, for example, the number of sermons that someone like John Wesley preached. I've heard numbers upwards of thirty and forty thousand sermons that he preached. It is recorded in history that John Wesley, of course, preached all the time. Sometimes he preached from dawn to sunset, day after day after day. He preached thousands upon thousands upon thousands of sermons. In fact, I used to wonder how in the world the man could preach that man sermons. How did he have that much material in his mind?

The answer comes when you understand that every day of his life John Wesley arose at four o'clock in the morning and proceeded on an absolutely rigorous routine of reading the Scripture, which he did for hours until he was ready to preach in the mornings. And he read the Scripture, interestingly enough, in five languages. Now we don't expect to be able to do that. He was able to do that. That giving him the breadth, and length and depth and height and all the nuances possible in the understanding of the Scripture. He was a man literally bursting with the knowledge of the Scripture which fed this immense capacity that he had for preaching. It all starts with reading the Scripture repetitiously.

One of my...one of my great teachers and the man who so wonderfully influenced me, Dr. Charles Feinberg, who was in many ways my mentor...is now with the Lord. But he was sort of my spiritual hero when it came to knowing the Bible. He knew the Bible so well he...if there was any man who didn't need to read it, he didn't need to read it. He knew practically the whole Old Testament in Hebrew. He had memorized massive sections of it in Hebrew and he had such an incredible mind.

I don't know what his IQ was but he had that familiar photographic memory that sometimes people talk about, never seem to forget anything. He had an immense mind and yet it was his routine habit to read through the Old Testament and the New four times every year. And he did that for decades which is why he had such great familiarity with the text of Scripture.

And as I told you earlier, familiarity with the text of Scripture is its own interpretation. As you begin to read Scripture it begins to interpret itself. It begins to unfold itself because these consistent truths are repeated again and again. And the Bible becomes its own best source of explanation, one scripture explaining another. And you'll be amazed as you begin to absorb the Word of God, reading, as I told

you, through the Old Testament and then on a 30-day basis, repetitiously, in the New. You do that for a few years and you will begin to marvel at the grasp that you have on the meaning of Scripture because it becomes so clear just by virtue of the repetition.

And as I've told you before...I'll just repeat briefly again. I like to interpret the Bible with the Bible. That's the best source of interpretation. And in most cases you can do that. In other words, nothing in the Bible is so absolutely isolated that you have to interpret in its own context and not beyond. Everything in Scripture, most everything in Scripture is linked to other matters in Scripture that assist in the interpretation of that matter itself. An illustration of that, for example...and there could be many. But one that comes to mind in reading through John chapter 3. Jesus talks to Nicodemus and Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You must be born of the water and the Spirit."

Now somebody might ask the question, "What is He talking about? What does He mean you must be born of the water and the Spirit?" And I've heard people say, "Well the water there means baptism. You have to be Spirit-baptized and you have to be water baptized." And there are whole groups of people who teach that. That doesn't make any sense, since Christian baptism hadn't been instituted at the time of that conversation. And furthermore, since water baptism is not the means of salvation.

Others have suggested, and I've heard this preached, that what it means, you must be born of the water, and the Spirit is you must be born physically. That's the water. You know, the water breaks and then the baby comes. And so that's the water that is part of human birth; you must be humanly born and then you must be born of the Spirit.

The problem with that is the Jews didn't refer to that as water. The right answer is simply available to you if you read Ezekiel. Because in the prophecy of Ezekiel chapter 36 Ezekiel says, "There's coming a new covenant and in that new covenant God is going to take away the stony heart of your flesh and He's going to give you a heart of flesh, a tender heart, He's going to put His Spirit within you and He's going to sprinkle water upon you and wash you."

And if you further read back into the New Testament you're going to find that it is the washing of the water of the Word. That's what it's talking about. The Scripture gives its own explanation. You don't need a medical explanation or a clinical explanation and you don't need some kind of ecclesiastical explanation. The Bible itself is its own best interpreter. I remember when I was going through Peter's epistles and was talking about a very interesting phrase in 1 Peter, 1 Peter 1:2, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood. And I read that phrase and I thought, "What in the world does that mean?"

And I started reading in commentaries and I couldn't find anything that satisfied me. I had all kinds of explanations. And as I began to study I found that same concept in the 24th chapter of Exodus. Because I was familiar with what Exodus said, went back to Exodus chapter 24 verses 3 through 8, found a whole ceremony there, a ceremony when the people of Israel declared their obedience to God and that they would be faithful to the Word of God. And at that particular time Moses splattered blood all over them as a symbol of their declaration of obedience.

And that's precisely what Peter who was a Jew would have in mind as he was writing to Jews. He would be saying to them that when you acknowledge Jesus Christ as Savior, you are like those of old, affirming your obedience, and in a symbolic sense being sprinkled with His blood rather than the

blood of a sacrifice in the case of Exodus 24. I don't need to go into any more detail other than to say Exodus 24 gives a clear understanding of what 1 Peter 1:2 is talking about. So to be a student of the Bible, first of all, is to grasp the sweep of Scripture by repetitious reading.

Now let's go a second feature, and that is to interpret the Bible. And we'll have to spend a little time on this. Now, you've read it and, hopefully, as you've read it you've kept a little bit of a log of the things that interest you. And you're going to spend some extra time each week going back to some of those issues that you wrote down because you didn't understand them. And this is what I've done through the years. Those things that I don't understand become the priority list for my own personal study in depth. Again, this has to go beyond devotions.

And as I mentioned this morning, just sort of reading the Bible as a little bit of a daily exercise of fifteen minutes and then reading another passage the next day and another one and never really understanding the depth of what you read, is not life changing. It's sort of like popping one aspirin a day. You know it may have a little bit of effect in the long run, but it's not going to change your life. The Ethiopian eunuch was asked the question, "Do you understand what you're reading?" To which he replied to Philip's question, "How can I except some man should – " What? – "should guide me." I have to have some help. I'm reading it, but I'm not sure I really understand it.

And that's going to be true as you study the Bible. That's why when you go back to Nehemiah...go back for a minute to Nehemiah chapter 8. In Nehemiah chapter 8, the Word of God had been found and Ezra the scribe read the Word of God to the people. Verse 1, "They all gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel.

"Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from early morning until midday in the presence of men and women, those who could understand and all the people were attentive to the book of the law."

Now they were there for at least six hours, standing in the open square listening to six hours of Bible reading. That tells me they had an attention span that our culture doesn't know anything about. And they were attentive the whole time. "And Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium – " that's where these came from I guess, these pulpits – "which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah," and the rest. In verse 5, "And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people and when he opened it all the people stood up." So they stood up for six hours in the open square and listened to him read.

"Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands." That was the start, I guess, of what still goes on when the Word of God is proclaimed. People say Amen. "They bowed low, worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. And those who were assisting Ezra – " are listed there in verse 7. Look at the end of the verse – "explained the law to the people while the people remained in their place. And they read from the book, from the law of God, translating – " or interpreting, or explaining – "to give the sense so that they understood the reading."

That's the second aspect of Bible study. You listen, you hear, you absorb what you can and then you

go beyond. What does the Bible say? First question, what does the Bible say? Second question, what does it mean by what it says? What does it mean by what it says? This is dividing the truth rightly. This is cutting it straight. And this is absolutely necessary if it's going to fit together. If you don't cut the pieces right you can't put the whole thing together.

We were having a discussion the other night in the elders' meeting, which I thought was a very helpful discussion about theology. And there are many people who would say, "I reject systematic theology and I accept biblical theology." Well, I want to be known as a biblical theologian. In that sense your theology...your theology unfolds from the text, your theology is unleashed from the text. Your theology rises from the text of Scripture. You don't want to develop a system of theology and then impose it like a grid on the Bible. You want to be a biblical theologian. And that is to say that the theology arises out of the text, it arises out of the very verses themselves.

But, listen very carefully, that is not in conflict with systematic theology. It may be in conflict with the classic concept of dogmatic theology which is an ecclesiastical theological system imposed upon the Bible and people. It may be in conflict with dogmatic theology which is a technical term for that. But it is not in conflict with systematic theology. I'll tell you what I mean. When you have gone through the Bible and it has yielded all of its truth, and it has said everything God wants to say, when you're done that will be a perfect flawless non-contradictory system of truth. It has to be systematic because God is a God of absolute order.

So as we were saying the other night, it is simplistic to say you reject systematic theology. You can't say that. You can say I reject a non-biblical theological grid or dogmatic theology developed by some ecclesiastics or some people or some person and imposed upon the Scripture. But when you have done your...all your work on biblical theology, what it yields is a perfect harmonious ordered theology with no contradictions, which is what a perfect system is, achieving and accomplishing everything that is perfectly reflective of the nature of God. So we are...we're trying to come to such a clear and comprehensive and complete understanding of what the Bible teaches from Genesis to Revelation that we can say, "Here it is in its perfect order and perfect harmony, perfect interrelation without contradiction."

In that sense we acknowledge systematic theology. It is not the interpreter of Scripture, but it is the result of a proper interpretation of Scripture. When you go to the Word of God with the exegetical tools, with an expositional approach and it yields its truth, in the end it will be perfectly harmonious. And that's part also of believing in what we call *analogia scriptura*. That is to say the Scripture is consistent within itself, analogous to itself and non-contradictory in any sense. There are mysteries, yes, we don't understand. There are things that are apparently contradictory to us but they are not in reality contradictory at all because God is a God of order not a God of confusion.

So it is necessary then for us to carefully interpret Scripture so as to come up with what it says, and in the end so that it perfectly comes together in order and harmony without contradiction. Now if you mess up the interpretation on the way, you can't have that ordered system at the end. It's absolutely crucial that we rightly divide the Word of God. That's why I've said through the years, the only person who really has a right to be a theologian is an exegete. Somebody who interprets Scripture has a right to say I'm a theologian, somebody who does not interpret the pages of Scripture can say he's a theologian but he is a theologian by borrowing from somebody else. The purest theology rises out of the text itself.

Now misinterpretation of the Bible has created many, many, many problems. Let me give you some illustrations. Some have said since the patriarchs in the time of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the patriarchs practiced polygamy so may we. Who says that? The Mormon church. Others have said since the Old Testament sanctioned the divine right of the king of Israel, all kings have divine rights. Europe had lots of kings that exercised what they thought was a divine right, somehow borrowed from Old Testament Israel.

In America even there was this interesting viewpoint back in Massachusetts. Since the Old Testament sanctioned the death of witches, we should kill them all too. Because some Old Testament plagues were from God, we should avoid sanitation. Now there's an interesting view. If you start getting...if you start getting too sanitary you're going to cripple God. Because God uses plagues to destroy ungodly people we ought to avoid sanitation.

Here's another interesting viewpoint that has arisen. Because the Old Testament teaches that women suffer in childbirth as a divine punishment, no anesthetic should ever be used. That's an interesting thought, isn't it? Since part of God's curse on humanity is that women have pain in childbearing, anything that mitigates that pain is against the will of God. And I told you about the one that I ran into in Romania some years back, and it's also true in Russia. Since women are saved by childbearing they should never do anything of a contraceptive nature and if they ever do they're liable to lose their salvation.

Now some people look at the Bible and they see all of this and they just sort of scratch their head and say, "I don't know what to do with all this." I remember talking to a very prominent man, who was a pastor who was a former fellow student of mine, eventually went on to attend seminary, graduated from seminary, was a pastor of a church, and I was talking to him one time at a conference at Hume Lake where both of us were speaking. And he was speaking on interpreting the Old Testament. And he just openly said to the people, he said, "You know, I...I've just decided to take everything for everybody." Everything in the Old Testament for everybody? That's a...that's a pretty amazing statement.

And so when I saw him after some of the sessions I said to him, I said, "I wanted to ask you about that thing you said last night. You said that you decided that trying to sort it all out in the Old Testament was pretty complicated. You just decided to take everything for everybody." I happened to catch him, too, at the time while he was eating a hot dog and it was not an all-beef frank. What do you mean you take everything for everybody? When did you slaughter your last lamb? And how come you cut your sideburns and haven't wrapped them around your ears? I mean, why are you eating that hot dog?

You can't say that. You have to interpret the Scriptures. You can't come up with a blanket concept. People often ask me, "What is the key to interpreting the Old Testament in order to understand what was for the Jews in their time and what is for us?" Answer. The context of every passage. There's no singular formula that you can just dump on the whole Old Testament. Now, in accurately handling the Word of God three errors have to be avoided. I'm going to give you these three errors to be avoided, and then next Sunday we're going to talk about how to get it right.

Three errors have to be avoided. Don't ever come to a conclusion at the price of a proper interpretation. Don't ever come to a conclusion or make a point at the price of a proper interpretation. Don't use the Scripture to support your viewpoint. You come up with a neat idea; you think it works,

so you just push the Scripture into it. I mean, this gets real bizarre.

This rather frantic writer was preaching against women putting their hair up on top of their head, because he thought that since a woman's hair was her covering her glory it ought to be all over the place all the time. So putting it up on the head was a breach of Scripture. And supposedly the verse used was found in Matthew 24, "Top not come down." Now you know the verse, don't you? It's talking about the time of Tribulation and it says, "Let those on the housetop not come down."

It's like the preacher who went visiting one day and knocked on the door of his parishioner's home wanting to give them some spiritual counsel. And he banged and banged. He could see the television running; the lights were on, bang, bang, bang, bang, no one came. So he wrote out, "Behold, I stood at the door and knocked, if any man had heard my voice and opened I would have come in and supped with him." Stuck it in the doorknob. Sunday a lady came by and handed him a note, said, Genesis 3:10, "I was naked and hid myself."

Well, I suppose there are such bizarre uses of Scripture 'cause that's a bizarre way to illustrate the point. Scripture gets clumsily used. That's one thing. Scripture gets inappropriately used; Scripture gets manipulated. I remember reading about interpretation of Jewish...this is not just germane to us, but Jewish interpreters of Scripture of long ago when writing about the Tower of Babel wrote some pretty bizarre things, rabbis who wanted to stress concern for people.

There were some rabbis who were very concerned that the folks in Israel didn't care and show love toward people. And so they took the story of the Tower of Babel and they said that the reason God changed all the languages and scattered the nations all over the earth was because...you remember about them building this tower and they were building it higher and higher and higher. The rabbis concocted this amazing story about guys who were the hod carriers, you know, who had to carry the mortar and the bricks clear to the top. And as the thing got higher they had to go higher and walk up, and walk up this scaffolding higher and higher and higher.

And according to this rabbinical insight, many of them fell off the scaffolding and died. It took many, many hours for a man to carry a load of bricks to the bricklayers at the top. And, of course, if a man fell off the tower on the way down, no one paid attention. But if he fell off on the way up, they lost their bricks. And so they were mourning because the bricks were dropped and that's why God confounded their language because they were more concerned about bricks than they were about the death of people.

And that's how the rabbis interpreted that passage to get their point across. Good point, you should care more about people than bricks. But it's not there. Don't take Scriptures out of context. Don't make a point at the price of an interpretation that is accurate and true. This requires diligence, careful study, thoughtful study, so that we rightly divide the Word of truth and therefore do not need to be ashamed, 2 Timothy 2:15.

Second, avoid superficial interpretation. Avoid superficial interpretation. One of the common problems in interpreting the Bible is this little phrase, "This verse means to me – " so forth and so forth and so forth. Let me tell you something. It doesn't matter what it means to you. The question is what would it mean if you didn't live? What would it mean if you didn't exist?

What does it mean period is the issue, not what does it mean to you. Sometimes you'll hear people get together and supposedly have a Bible study which is a little more than a pooling of ignorance. People say, "Well, I look at this verse and I feel this verse is saying – " It doesn't matter what you feel. That has nothing to do with it.

It's not a matter of how you feel about the verse; it's not a matter of what you think it means to you. Avoid adlibbing in Bible interpretation; avoid freewheeling in Bible interpretation, haphazard handling of God's Word. We all want to acknowledge the priesthood of the believer. Yes, we all want to acknowledge that we have anointing from God, the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and the Spirit of God who dwells within us is the teacher who teaches us. We all want to acknowledge that. But that is not justification for flippancy dealing with Scripture. That's why in 1 Timothy 5:17 it says, The elders who work hard in the Scripture are worthy of double honor. It is hard work.

Avoid superficial interpretation. Avoid "this means to me." That is not a statement that should preface any interpretation of Scripture. The question is what does it mean if you don't exist? What did it mean before you were born? And what will it mean it after you're dead? What does it mean to people who will never meet you? What does it mean, period, is the issue.

And then thirdly, another thing just to mention by way of avoidance. Avoid spiritualizing or allegorizing the Bible, spiritualizing or allegorizing the Bible. This is that which gives to the Bible some kind of mystical meaning. In other words, what is on the surface is not the meaning, but what is hidden becomes the meaning. This is very popular. We could talk about allegorizing, it's quite...it's not quite as popular today as it used to be, although it's finding a resurgence.

Allegorizing means to say that the historical meaning is not the real meaning, and in fact may be nothing but a fabrication. The historical meaning is not the real meaning. The real meaning is the spiritual meaning hidden beneath the surface. And once you say that something in the Bible is an allegory, that is it is only a symbol of the reality, you have just made it impossible to know what that reality is. Because if that reality cannot be discerned through the normal understanding of language, how can it be discerned?

For example, a book was written a number of years ago called *If I Perish, I Perish*. It was purported to be a commentary on the book of Esther. And in it Esther...it was allegorizing the book of Esther so that Esther became the Holy Spirit. And the whole story of the book was the operation of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer in the battle between the flesh and the Spirit and spiritual warfare and so forth. And much of what was in the book was true New Testament truth but it had absolutely nothing to do with the book of Esther so it therefore convoluted the meaning of Esther. And no person reading the book of Esther ever would have understood that meaning. No normal understanding of Esther would have yielded that.

Patricia and I were at a Bible conference back in Lake Geneva. And I was there with another speaker, another preacher. I'll never forget the occasion because he was preaching, and then I was preaching and we were alternating, having a good time doing that. And I said to him...we were having some lunch or a snack in this little cafe place there at this conference center, George Williams College on Lake Geneva. And I said, "What are you going to preach on tonight?" And he said, "I'm going to preach on the Rapture of the church."

I said, "Oh, that's great, that will be wonderful, I'm sure and folks will be encouraged." I said, "What's going to be your text?" He said, "John 11." And I said to myself, "John 11? The Rapture is John 14, 1Thessalonians 4, 1 Corinthians 15. What is John 11?" I said, "John 11 is the resurrection of Lazarus. It's all about Lazarus being raised from the dead, Mary and Martha and –" I said, "How is it that you're going to preach on the Rapture from John 11?" He said, "Oh, you'll have to come tonight." I said, "I guess I will." So he preached on the Rapture from John 11.

Now I can't remember...it was really clever and people were saying, "Deep, deep, wow," you know. They don't know. It just...and Lazarus was the church, and him coming forth was the dead saints being raised, and I think Martha was the Old Testament saints and Mary was the living New Testament saints. And the thing went on for an hour and it was very cleverly done. It just wasn't there.

And when it was over, we met again and he said to me, he said, "Had you ever seen that in John 11?" And I said, "No one has ever seen that in John 11." And the next day when he got up to speak. He said, "You know, I got a wonderful compliment yesterday. John MacArthur said no one before me had ever seen that in John 11." Now I believe in the Rapture of the church. It's not in John 11. There are things in John 11 that ought to be preached.

But once you tell me what it says is not what it means, then you can tell me it means anything. Because if I can't get the meaning out of the normal use of the language, how in the world can I get the meaning? I listened to a series of eight tapes, a study...a study of the book of Nehemiah. And I remember this so vividly because we were in a dialogue in some counseling when Jerry Mitchell was on our pastoral staff years ago. And Jerry came to me and said, "I had a very strange counseling session this morning, John. Maybe you can help me with it.

"I counseled with a young couple, they're going to get married. They decided to get married. And I started to ask them why are you going to get married, and the only good answer they had was that it was a sermon their pastor preached." And it was the same pastor that had put this series out that I had been listening to. And I said, "Well what did he preach on?" He said, "He preached on the walls of Jericho." I said, "What do you mean he preached on the walls of Jericho? What does that have to do with them getting married?"

He said, "Well, it went like this. You claim something and then march around it seven times and it'll fall to you. So it was applied that if you see a girl that you really believe is God's choice, just find some way to march around her seven times, and the walls of her heart will fall down." And it was on the basis of that sermon that they had determined to get married. And Jerry said, "What do you think our counsel ought to be because...well we had an interesting discussion?"

I went from that to the series on Nehemiah in which Nehemiah was the Holy Spirit. The king's pool which is in the city, you know when they were building the wall...he mentions the king's pool...was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. And the building of the wall, the mortar between the bricks was tongues. And the whole point of Nehemiah is that God wants to send the Holy Spirit to baptize you with the Spirit and build the fallen walls of your human personality through speaking in tongues.

Now, you see if you're going to do that with the Bible, you can't get that from the text. It's pure fantasy. But it goes on all the time and I've often said...sometimes I say to our pastors, "You don't

need the Bible for that. If you're going to do that you can use anything, you can use anything." You can preach Little Bo Peep. You could. You could start off by saying, "Little Bo Peep, oh she was only little, but God can use the little ones. And her name was...her name was Bo Peep. What a name of insignificance, what a name of ridicule, but God uses those who have been ridiculed. Little Bo Peep, she lost her sheep. All over this world sheep are lost. Doesn't know where to find them." The only part I couldn't figure out was what you do with wagging their tails behind them.

It's a very dangerous thing to allegorize or spiritualize Scripture. What it means is what it says when rightly understood in its historic context. Well, that's enough for tonight, next Sunday I'm going to tell you how to do that. Okay? Look how the time went, sorry. Let's pray.

Father, help us to have a love for Your Word developing in our hearts to the degree that we will study it faithfully and diligently. Thank You for giving us Your Word. Thank You for the gift of language which conveys Your truth simply and directly. Lord, show us the truth as we diligently study Your Word. May we rightly divide it so that its truths can transform us and bring You glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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