



The BibleKEY Correspondence Course

LESSON 5 - PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETION

*"...The Holy Scriptures...are able to make thee wise unto salvation"
- 2 Timothy 3:15.*

The Bible conveys ideas to our minds in various ways. It means exactly what it says. If the Bible is God's revelation to man, it must be capable of being understood by man. And it is addressed to all men: not just a favored class, or a learned few. The Bible speaks to each one of us, directly and personally. It is meant to be understood by ordinary people. *No special scholarly training is necessary.* Its words convey certain ideas, using words and phrases with their ordinary, natural, common significance. Literal language is the basis of the Bible.

PROPHECY: LITERAL EXPRESSIONS PREDICTING LITERAL EVENTS

Let us compare the *literal* expressions of the Bible with the *literal* events to which they refer. For instance, in Deuteronomy 28:37 (addressed to Israel), we read -

"Thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all nations whither the Lord shall lead thee."

The actual *literal* fulfillment of this prophecy by God through Moses is witnessed throughout the world in all nations and by all people. It is just as true today as it has been for centuries, since the Jewish nation was dispersed throughout the world.

No one, then, will question the despised and wandering condition to which the Jewish nation has been subjected, whether they accept the Word of God or not. We see that a literal prophecy - simple, easy words meaning just what they say - has been literally fulfilled. Now let us look at another simple, easy - to - understand prophecy about this same people, this time from Ezekiel 37:21, 22 -

"Behold, I (God) will take the children of Israel from among the heathen whither they be gone, and will gather them on every side, and bring them into their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel: and one king shall be king to them all. And they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all."

Here is another literal prophecy from the Word of God, about the same people. As the above words of God through Moses referred to a literal people and literal events which literally came to pass, so we must accept this statement from Ezekiel in just as real and literal a manner. Actually, we today see the beginnings of the literal fulfillment of the latter prophecy, as the Jews return to Palestine.

Again, take a prophecy from Micah (5:2), and its New Testament fulfillment -

"But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto Me that is to be ruler in Israel."

"Now Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea" (Matthew 2:1).

Here again is a simple literal prophecy with a fulfillment in a literal manner. The whole so-called "Christian" world accepts this fact. The same rule of literal interpretation must prevail in all the Word of God, and will be found to do so.

BibleKEY fact:

“ *The Bible is meant to be understood by ordinary people. No special scholarly training is necessary.* ”

BibleKEY definition:

"prophecy" - the prediction of a future event

BibleKEY fact:

“ *Literal language is the basis of the Bible.* ”

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FIGURES OF SPEECH

Of course, this simple, reasonable literal rule of understanding does not exclude the normal use of *figures of speech* - a well-understood aspect of any language. We constantly use figures of speech in our everyday conversation, and are understood without confusing the literal basis of our speech; and so we naturally find the same in the Bible. These do not confuse us in our daily communications together so it should be no problem when we find them in God's Word. They were well known and used in Bible times, and the Greeks and Romans had given names to hundreds of them. The Companion Bible enumerates 181 figures of speech used in the Bible. For the purpose of this lesson we will look at several which are most important to Bible interpretation.

1. Metaphor

For example, we find Jesus Christ referred to as a Stone, a Branch, a Lamb, a Shepherd, and the Bread of Life. Such metaphor beautifies and broadens our understanding of the literal subjects which are discussed.

When we speak of tyrants "trampling the rights of their subjects under their feet," we mix literal language with metaphorical language. But all understand us, and the literal part is not lost. No one is in danger of supposing that "rights" are literal substances that can be crushed to pieces under the mechanical action of the feet. And the literal tyrants and their literal subjects remain quite clear to our hearers. Similarly, a "black look" has nothing to do with color.

This may sound like over-simplification, and very elementary. It is important, nonetheless, because these simple and obvious rules of common metaphorical use, when appearing in the Bible, have been misused to distort the basic truth of God's Word, and the literal has been denied simply because there is a metaphorical element.

Here are a few illustrations of the use of metaphor in the Scriptures, and we note that, interpreted reasonably as we would any book, the literal is quite clear -

*"The Lord hath taken you, and brought you forth out of the **iron furnace**, even out of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 4:20).*

The land of Egypt was not an actual furnace, but the circumstances of Israel's sufferings there are likened to being in a furnace. Again -

*"Behold, the Lord bringeth up upon them **the waters of the river** . . . even the king of Assyria . . . he shall **come up over all his channels, and go over all his banks**" (Isaiah 8:7).*

*"The Lord shall make thee (Israel) the **head, and not the tail**" (Deuteronomy 28).*

By the principle of metaphorical speech a beast is put for an empire, horns for kings, waters for people, rivers for nations, a woman for world government, etc. A vivid illustration of this can be found in Daniel 7:2-7, when God revealed to Daniel and to us the long panorama of history from the days that Judah went into Babylonian captivity to the time when God will establish His Kingdom on this earth -

". . . and four great beasts came up from the Sea, diverse one from another: the first was like a lion . . . a second, like to a bear . . . and lo another like to a leopard . . . and behold a fourth beast, dreadful and terrible" (vs. 2-7).

Then Daniel was told in literal language what these beasts represented -

BibleKEY fact:

“*...figures of speech... were well known and used in Bible times, and the Greeks and Romans had given names to hundreds of them.*”

BibleKEY definitions:

"metaphor" - *a declaration that one thing represents another*

"simile" - *a declaration that one thing resembles another*

BibleKEY fact:

“*The land of Egypt was not an actual furnace, but the circumstances of Israel's sufferings there are likened to being in a furnace*”

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*"These great beasts, which are four, are **four kings**" (world empires), "which shall arise out of the **earth**..." (the populations of the inhabited world) Daniel 7:17, 18, 27.*

By the ordinary laws of language, there should not be the slightest difficulty here in determining what is meant, what is literal, and what is figurative.

2. Parables & Allegories

Parables are often used in the Bible to illustrate the meaning of an important lesson or teaching. Jesus many times used parables to augment his teachings for the purpose of developing the understanding of those who had "ears to hear". When asked by the disciples on one occasion as to why he spoke in parables, he replied -

"Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." (Matthew 13:11)

Allegories are similar to parables, and the terms can sometimes even be used interchangeably. The difference is that often in an allegory there is a wider divergence between the illustration and its object. An obvious example of an allegory may be found in Galatians 4:22-31 where certain personalities from the Old Testament are used allegorically to illustrate the advantages of being under the system of the grace of God in Christ compared to the disadvantages of remaining under the system of the Law of Moses. The metaphors and representations employed are very colorful, and can only be fully appreciated when one understands the characters of the personalities named; but the context of the passage clearly explains the meaning, which points to a very clear and basic literal teaching as stated above.

3. Types or Shadows

The Bible makes great use of types and shadows - usually in some manner pointing forward to Christ and his work. Again, the literal cannot be ignored. Wherever there is type or shadow there must be substance. A person's shadow could not exist without the presence of the literal person which is greater than the shadow.

An example of the use of the word "shadow" in the Bible occurs in Hebrews 10:1 -

*"For the **law** (the Law of Moses) having a **shadow** of good things to come (Jesus Christ), and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect."*

Much of the book of Hebrews is dedicated to illustrating how the sacrifices and regulations of the Law of Moses served as shadows pointing forward to the reality - the work of Jesus Christ. This will be explained in greater detail in future lessons.

Again in Colossians 2:16-17 (RSV) -

*"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath (i.e., ordinances belonging to the Law of Moses).. **These** are only a **shadow** of what is to come; but the **substance** belongs to **Christ**."*

These examples also indicate how well the context explains the meaning of the type so that we are not left to guess at it.

Jesus also often employed the use of types to teach literal lessons, and again, often did not leave any doubt as to the meaning. For example -

BibleKEY fact:

“Wherever there is type or shadow there must be substance.”

BibleKEY definitions:

"parable" - continued comparison by resemblance (simile)

"allegory" - continued comparison by representation (metaphor)

"type" (or "shadow") - a dim figure or ensample of something greater and in the future (called the "anti-type")

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"As it was in the days of Noah (the shadow), so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man (the reality, or 'anti-type')." Luke 17:26

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up:" John 3:14

4. Personification

We often use this figure of speech in our casual day-to-day conversation. For example, we often refer to objects such as cars, ships, houses, etc., as "she" or "her". Likewise, personification is a common figure of speech employed by scripture to communicate ideas, concepts and lessons. The following examples serve to illustrate:

RICHES are personified -

"No man can serve two masters...Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Matthew 6:24

SIN is personified (represented as a master to whom we are servants) -

"Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin." John 8:34

"Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin." Romans 6:6

WISDOM is personified -

"Happy is the man that findeth wisdom...She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her." Proverbs 3:13-15

"Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars:" Proverbs 9:1 (see also vv. 2-3)

Other examples could be cited, but the above is sufficient to make the point. This scriptural usage of personification is extremely important to remember as we come to consider important Bible doctrines later in this course.

5. Metonymy

Metonymy is another figure of speech that is constantly used in everyday speech without even thinking about it. For instance we speak sometimes of "boiling the kettle" when what we really mean is boiling the water in the kettle. So in this case the term "kettle" is put in place of the "water" that is inside of it.

The following are some instances of places where scripture makes use of this figure of speech:

"So they poured out for the men to eat. And it came to pass, as they were eating of the pottage, that they cried out, and said, O thou man of God, there is death in the pot. And they could not eat thereof." 2 Kings 4:40

Here "death" is put for the **poison** in the pot which was the **cause** of death. Therefore, by "death" we are to understand "poison".

"The burden of Babylon, which Isaiah the son of Amoz did see." Isaiah 13:1

"Burden" is put for the **message** which foretold the coming burden.

"And he went forward a little, and fell on the ground, and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him." Mark

BibleKEY definitions:

"personification" - the representation of something as though it were a person.

"metonymy" - where one name or noun is used in place of another, to which it stands in a certain relation

BibleKEY fact:

“The scriptural usage of personification is extremely important to remember as we come to consider important Bible doctrines later in this course”

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14:35

Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour: but for this cause came I unto this hour." John 12:27

Here "*hour*" is put for the **sufferings** that he was to endure when that "hour" came. Therefore, by "hour" we are to understand "sufferings". That is metonymy, and it important to recognize it when it occurs in scripture.

6. Symbolism

We also find the use of *symbolic* language throughout the Bible; but again there is no cause for confusion or confounding the basic, literal foundation of the Word of God. Symbols are simply another colorful method of conveying literal messages of God's truth to our minds. For example -

*Isaiah 22:22 And the **key** of the house of David will I lay upon his shoulder...*

"*Key*" conveys to our minds the literal message of **delegated authority**.

*Galations 2:9 ...James, Cephas, and John...gave to me and Barnabas the **right hands** of fellowship...*

"*Right hands of fellowship*" carries a meaning of **unity, agreement**.

These examples briefly illustrate the Biblical use of symbols, and shows there is no difficulty in distinguishing the symbols from the literal message. We must treat the Bible as literal when by the ordinary rules of language it obviously is literal. We cannot, like many, deny the literalness of those clear statements that do not correspond with traditional views.

Figures of speech such as we have considered are simply employed to expand and illustrate the literal foundation. As the alphabet must be known and understood before we can learn words, so the literal basis of Scripture must be understood before we can grasp the metaphoric and symbolic, etc.

A FEW ADDITIONAL SIMPLE RULES

1. Do not ignore the **CONTEXT** !

One of the fundamental principles of Bible study and interpretation is that of **observing the context**. Most of the problems associated with understanding the Bible could be overcome by simply reading the verses before and/or after the passage in question. Be sure there is consistency of interpretation and application throughout a passage. For instance, if an interpretation of a symbol seems to fit well in one verse of a passage but not in another verse of the passage **where the context is the same**, it may indicate an error in the interpretation and application of the symbol.

2. Let the Bible be its own interpreter.

Practice the cross-referencing of passages, remembering that the Bible never contradicts itself. Always carefully consider the subject and circumstances and time periods. Many passages will supply the key that will unlock the door to the understanding of them. The Bible is a logical book; when everything fits and makes sense, you will be on the right track! Remember this principle as it will be referred to and illustrated often in future lessons. Apply it well in your own reading of scripture.

BibleKEY definition:

"symbol" - a material object substituted for a moral or spiritual truth

BibleKEY fact:

“As the alphabet must be known and understood before we can learn words, so the literal basis of Scripture must be understood before we can grasp the metaphoric and symbolic., etc.”

BibleKEY fact:

“...if an interpretation of a symbol seems to fit well in one verse of a passage but not in another verse of the passage **where the context is the same**, it may indicate an error in the interpretation and application of the symbol.”

PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE INTERPRETION

3. Use ALL of the Bible !

The **entirety** of the Bible from cover to cover is essential to comprehend the divine plan of salvation. The Old Testament and the New are an inseparable unit, in perfect harmony. All is the revelation of God for our necessary instruction. Both have been preserved by God's providence to our times to provide the necessary information for our intelligent understanding, and obedient walk before God.

Some have questioned the present need and usefulness of the Old Testament. No more fatal error could be made. The Old forms the heart and explanation of the New. They are inseparable. If we take away the Old, we completely destroy the usefulness of the New. They stand or fall together. We cannot possibly understand the New without the Old. Paul wrote to Timothy (2 Timothy 3 15) -

"The SCRIPTURES are able to make thee wise unto salvation."

When Paul wrote this, the SCRIPTURES he was referring to was the Old Testament! The New was not written at that time. Throughout the New Testament, the importance of the Old Testament, and an understanding of it, are constantly emphasized, as in the following -

*"I (Paul) continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying **none other things than those which the Prophets and Moses did say should come**: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should show light unto the people, and to the Gentiles" (Acts 26:22-23).*

*"So worship I the God of my fathers, believing **ALL things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets**" (Acts 24:14).*

*"Paul reasoned with them....**out of the [Old Testament!] Scriptures**" (Acts 17:2).*

*"That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before **by the holy prophets**" (2 Peter 3:2).*

*"We have also a more sure word of prophecy, whereunto **ye do well that ye take heed**, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place...Knowing this first, that no prophecy is of any private interpretation. **For prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved the the Holy Spirit**" (2 Peter 1:19-21).*

Jesus himself emphasized the same principle (John 5:46-47) -

*"Had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me, for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, **how shall ye believe my words?**"*

Of the Old Testament, he said:

"The Scriptures cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

The basis which Paul, Peter and Jesus here set forth should also be *our* approach to the Word of God - the *use and study of the entire Bible*. This basis will form the foundation of the lessons which will follow, God willing.

BibleKEY fact:

“ *The Old Testament and the New are an inseparable unit, in perfect harmony. The Old forms the heart and explanation of the New. If we take away the Old, we completely destroy the usefulness of the New.* ”

BibleKEY fact:

“ *When the writers of the N.T. used the term SCRIPTURES they were referring to the Old Testament because the New Testament was not in circulation at that time.* ”

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Name Mr/Mrs/Miss

Address Postal Code

* You may need an additional sheet for your answers if there is not enough space below. Your answers to the following questions will help you - and us - to determine how much you have discovered about your Bible. Please return this form in the envelope provided even if you are unable to answer all the questions. On receipt of it we will forward a further study, as well as some comments on your answers.

1. a) What is the definition of "prophecy"?
b) Give one example of a prophecy which had a literal fulfilment.

2. Is the use of figures of speech in the Bible inconsistent with the principle that literal language is the basis of its communication?

3. a) What is the definition of a "metaphor"?
b) Can you think of an example in the Bible where a metaphor is used?

4. a) What is the definition of a "parable"?
b) Why did Jesus use parables to teach the people?

5. a) What is the definition of a "type" or "shadow"?
b) What book of the Bible devotes a large portion of its text to the use of types and shadows for the purpose of expounding upon the work of Christ?

6. a) What is the definition of "personification"?
b) What 3 things are examples of personification in the Bible?

7. a) What is the definition of "metonymy"?
b) Give an example of where metonymy is used in the Bible.

8. Explain what symbolism is as used in the Bible.

9. a) What is the most important principle of Bible study and interpretation?
b) Why?

10. What is meant by "Let the Bible be its own interpreter"?

11. Is it necessary to use both Old and New Testaments?

12. a) What part of the Bible did the apostles use as the basis for their teachings?
b) Why?