

What Does the Word Say?
Session 40: The literal meaning, understanding the Bible: Part II
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Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine hermeneutics, the principles we use to properly interpret the Bible. Dr. Spencer, last time we ended with an example of the old four-fold method of interpreting the Bible, which is called the Quadriga. Is there anything more to be said about that?

Dr. Spencer: I don't want to spend any more time on the quadriga itself, but I do want to point out that proper biblical interpretation certainly recognizes that all four types of meaning that were sought by that method – namely, the literal, moral, allegorical, and spiritual, do exist in the Bible. We just don't want to force every verse to have all four types of meaning. And, we want to be extremely careful with allegories because they can become quite fanciful and are sometimes a vehicle for very serious deviations from true biblical doctrine. But, we can't do away with them entirely either because the Bible itself tells us that some things are allegorical, as we will see later.

Marc Roby: Well, if we're done with the quadriga, then I suppose you want to get back to discussing what is meant by literal interpretation of the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: That's right, we need to get back to that because it is very important. I gave the example last time of our American expression "it's raining cats and dogs" and I pointed out that we all know what that means. So, in the sense we are using the term literal now, a literal interpretation of that phrase is that it is raining very hard. This example illustrates the fact that when we say we want to interpret the Bible literally, we do *not* mean that we ignore figures of speech, or any other form of communication that people ordinarily use. We want to be able to do what Paul commanded Timothy to do. In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul commanded him, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth."¹

Marc Roby: I certainly do not want to be ashamed and to have God disapprove of my work when I appear before him.

Dr. Spencer: And neither do I, nor does any other true Christian. We all want to receive God's approval on the Day of Judgment. To do that, we must recognize that the Bible was written by the Holy Spirit, through human authors, to communicate truth to God's people. And it's our job to find out what that truth is. God is perfect, and we can be confident that what he wrote can be understood correctly by us with the Holy Spirit helping us. I'm not saying that all parts of the Bible will be equally clear, but if we approach the job seriously, we can be confident that God will give us sufficient understanding of truth. If he were not able to do that, he wouldn't be much of a God, would he?

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Marc Roby: He certainly wouldn't be the true and living God we learn about in the Bible.

Dr. Spencer: Not even close. And notice that, once again, our confidence rests in the person of God, not in ourselves. But, we must still be diligent to do the hard work necessary. The Bible was written through different human authors at different times and places and in different situations, but it is all true and it is all God's revelation to us. In order to understand it, we need to take into account the language, culture, history, genre of writing, all normal figures of speech and so on.

But, we want to avoid looking for hidden meanings in the text or for purely subjective things that are somehow revealed to us privately as we study. As I noted last time, we need the Holy Spirit to help us, so we are not denying the role of the Holy Spirit, but we do deny that I can be given a proper understanding of some verse by the Holy Spirit that is completely inaccessible to you. If I'm understanding the verse correctly, I should be able to explain to you why it means what I think it means and you should be able to evaluate what I say without access to any private revelations that I may claim to have received.

Marc Roby: What you just said also implies that there is one, and only one, correct interpretation of a given verse. I can't have my meaning, and you have your meaning, both of which are different, and yet somehow both correct.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. There is only one meaning, but there may be many different *applications* of that meaning. So, for example, we can both understand correctly from James 4:6, which says that "God opposes the proud", that pride is sinful. And yet we can both apply that principle to ourselves in different ways because our sinful pride might manifest in very different ways. Now, given that there is only one meaning for each statement in the Bible, the question becomes, "How do we determine what that meaning is?"

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics correctly states, in Article 15, "We affirm the necessity of interpreting the Bible according to its literal, or normal, sense. The literal sense is the grammatical-historical sense, that is, the meaning which the writer expressed. Interpretation according to the literal sense will take account of all figures of speech and literary forms found in the text."²

Marc Roby: Now they say that the literal, or normal, sense is the "grammatical-historical sense", what exactly does that mean?

Dr. Spencer: That is a bit confusing, but the word grammatical is being used as a synonym for literal in this case. In his 1890 book called *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Milton Terry wrote that "The grammatical sense is essentially the same as the literal, the one expression being derived from

² Chicago Statement on Biblical Hermeneutics, Available from <http://defendinginerrancy.com/chicago-statements/> and also from <http://www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-hermeneutics>

the Greek, the other from the Latin.”³ In James Boice’s book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, he calls the method the historical-literal method.⁴

I wanted people to be familiar with these different terms, but, no matter what name is used, it is the normal method used by any careful reader to try and understand what an author means. It takes into account the normal rules of grammar and style, figures of speech and so on, in addition to the historical context, to try and understand what the author meant by what he wrote.

Marc Roby: Of course the ultimate author of the Bible is God the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is the ultimate author, but since he used human agents who used normal modes of human communication this technique is appropriate. We don’t need some special method for interpreting the Bible, although the fact that God is the author certainly does matter.

Marc Roby: We saw last time, for example, that our first rule of interpretation – that Scripture should be used to interpret other Scripture – is a direct result of the fact that God, who knows all things and cannot lie, is its author.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And we will see later that the fact that God is the author will have other implications as well. But, my point is that we don’t need some special “spiritual” way of interpreting the Bible. It is special, it is infallible, but it is also written, in a sense, just like any other book and should be read in much the same way. Having explicit rules to help us understand what is written, however, is especially important when we read a document that was written in a different culture, language or time than our own, as is the case with the Bible.

Even within our own culture and language we sometimes read things that are not immediately clear to us and we have to look up a word, or maybe even look up some allusion to a historical event or literary figure or whatever. And that problem becomes more serious when we are reading a translation of something originally written in a language that is foreign to us and/or something that was written at a time different from our own.

Marc Roby: I have certainly found that to be true in my own studies, and the problem is sometimes greatest with the most thoughtful and knowledgeable writers, and on the most important subjects, they often take the most work to understand deeply.

Dr. Spencer: I’ve noticed the same phenomenon, and I’m sure that our listeners have as well. So, in a sense, all we are really saying is that the Bible should be read very carefully, with the express purpose of finding out what God intended to communicate to us in each passage. And we must remember that some of the material in the Bible will be quite difficult and will require significant study for us to understand properly. But, the basic message of salvation is really very simple and clear.

³ Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, Hunt & Eaton, 1890 (available as a pdf file from file:///C:/Users/rrspe/Documents/Religion/Books%20&%20Papers/1883_terry_bib-hermeneutics.pdf)

⁴ James Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Revised in One Volume, InterVarsity Press, 1986, pg. 95

Marc Roby: And so, to a very large extent, are the Bible's commands for holy living. In Galatians 5:14, the apostle Paul wrote that "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Dr. Spencer: That is simple and clear in a sense or, as you put it, to a large extent. But, it also requires context to properly understand. What does it mean to love our neighbor? Even many non-Christians in our secular society would say that it is loving to confront someone when he is engaging in self-destructive behavior. Perhaps, for example, he has a serious problem with addiction. In that case, the Bible would agree that true love requires confronting him, which is never an easy thing to do.

But, the Bible would provide a much different list of self-destructive behaviors than our society would come up with! Because the Bible would have us be more concerned about his eternal state than his earthly circumstances. Therefore, anything that God has declared to be sin is eternally self-destructive. And many things that God says are sin, our society approves. As just one example, it would be loving my homosexual neighbor if I told him about God's law, which declares homosexuality to be a sin, and the eternal consequences of unrepentant sin, which is hell. But, I doubt that many in our culture would consider that message to be loving.

Marc Roby: You make a great point. Even something that seems quite clear and simple can be misunderstood. How then, practically speaking, do we use this grammatical-historical or historical-literal method of interpretation to be sure that we properly understand a passage?

Dr. Spencer: Well, as I just demonstrated, we must understand every passage in the context of all that the Bible teaches; that is part of the principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. But, we are going to get to context a bit later in our discussion.

The first thing we must do to understand any passage is to decide whether it is historical narrative, poetry, prophecy, parable or what. Only then can we go on to use the normal rules of grammar and syntax to understand what is said. So, let's begin by looking at the different genres that we encounter in the Bible.

Marc Roby: Alright, what is important for us to know about them?

Dr. Spencer: For much of the Bible it's not really a problem. I think most readers are comfortable with the difference between reading poetry, like one of the psalms, and historical narrative, like something in Chronicles. The problems come in when we deal with the forms of literature found in the Bible that are less familiar to us, like prophecy.

Marc Roby: What do we need to know about prophecy?

Dr. Spencer: First of all, prophecy does not just refer to predicting something about the future. Biblical prophecy is much more than that. A prophet is a spokesman for God. He declares God's will to the people. In fact, in Ephesians 4:11-12 Paul is writing about the different gifts given to the church and he says that Christ "gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service". So, there are still prophets in the church today, that's prophet with a little p. Anyone who

declares the Word of God, in other words any proper minister of the gospel, can be considered a prophet in that sense of the word.

Marc Roby: But, when you use the word prophet, most people think of someone like Isaiah, or Jeremiah.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure they do, and for good reason. But my point is simply that even with those prophets, what they said was meant for the instruction of the people they spoke to, just like a modern-day minister. There is, of course, a huge difference in that Isaiah and Jeremiah were inspired prophets and could declare "the Lord says" and then give new revelation. But, when we read them we need to remember who they were writing to, when they were writing, where they were writing and what was going on at the time. In other words, we need to know the historical, political, cultural and geographical context among other things.

Marc Roby: That sounds like a lot of work.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly can be, but it is also very enjoyable and rewarding. And, as we have argued multiple times, there is nothing more important than the Word of God, and a true Christian will delight in such study.

But, getting back to interpreting biblical prophecy, we must remember that these prophets were, first and foremost, speaking to their contemporaries. Whether or not they had any knowledge that their words were going to become part of the biblical canon later doesn't matter, because we were never their primary audience. The theologian Richard Pratt commented in a talk he gave at our church a number of years ago, that when we read the prophets we should think of ourselves as listening in on someone else's conversation.⁵ I think that can be a useful perspective to have in mind.

Marc Roby: That is an interesting way to think about it. But what about when they do predict future events?

Dr. Spencer: Let me quote from the book *Interpreting the Bible* by Mickelsen. He wrote that "Prophecy does have a future aspect. But the prediction of God's doings was given to a particular historical people, to awaken and stir them. They might not grasp all the meaning of the message, but the message – with the disclosure of future things – was given to influence the present action."⁶

Marc Roby: How should this fact affect our reading?

Dr. Spencer: It means that we should seek to understand what the passage we are reading teaches us about the nature of God, the nature of man, and God's providential control of history. Then we should seek to apply those lessons to our own lives.

⁵ Richard Pratt, *Interpreting the Old Testament Prophecies*, April 29, 2000, transcript available at <http://www.gracevalley.org/teaching/interpreting-the-old-testament-prophecies/>

⁶ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974, pg. 287

Marc Roby: I look forward to seeing an example of this next time, but we are out of time for today. I'd like to encourage our listeners to send their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.