

What Does the Word Say?

Session 48: The “Little god” heresy, enigmatic passages and a summary of hermeneutics, understanding the Bible: Part X

WhatDoesTheWordSay.org

Marc Roby: We have a question from one of our listeners to open our session again. Dr. Spencer, one of our listeners asked about multiple meanings of biblical passages. He wrote, “I believe you said that a passage of scripture has one meaning but several applications. Can Scriptures sometimes have two meanings? For example, sometimes I'm not sure if the Psalms are talking about the author's situation, or if it is actually a prophecy about something in the New Testament. Is it possible for it to mean both?”

Dr. Spencer: That’s a very good question and I think it points out that I wasn’t as clear as I could have been. When we say there is only one correct meaning for a particular passage, we don’t mean to exclude, for example, typology or even allegory in some rare cases like the passage from Galatians 4 we examined in Session 46. The primary thing we wish to exclude is the old idea from the quadriga that every passage has, in addition to its literal meaning, some other hidden meaning, whether it be moral, allegorical, spiritual or whatever.

Marc Roby: But, as our questioner noted, some of the material in psalms and, I might add, a lot of material in the prophets as well, does have meaning beyond that which could have been understood by the people at the time.

Dr. Spencer: That is absolutely true. We discussed prophecy in Session 41 and noted that the first thing we want to do when reading a passage of prophecy is to ask ourselves what it meant to the people at that time. But we also noted that we don’t want to stop there. We live in a time of much greater revelation and the Bible itself points out many ways in which the life of Jesus Christ fulfilled prophecies. So, we should also seek to understand the deeper significance of these prophecies.

The same thing is true in some of the psalms, especially for the so-called Messianic psalms. We noted in Session 20 that some Old Testament passages were recognized by the Jews, way before the time of Christ, as referring to the promised Messiah. For example, in Psalm 22 there are a number of allusions to the sufferings of Jesus Christ on the cross. When David wrote this psalm, he could not have known all the details we now know unless they were revealed to him directly by God. We aren’t told what David knew in this specific case, but we are told that the Old Testament writers sometimes knew that they were writing about the future.

Marc Roby: Your observation reminds me of Acts 2, where Peter addressed the crowd on the day of Pentecost. He quoted a portion of Psalm 16, which was also written by King David, and he applied it to Jesus Christ. Peter told the crowd, as we read in Acts 2:30-31, that David “was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.”¹

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Dr. Spencer: That is a great passage. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the apostle Peter tells us clearly that David wrote about future events in Psalm 16. So, at least for that passage we know for certain that it had reference to the promised Messiah. We are also told in 1 Peter 1:10-12 that “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things.”

Marc Roby: That is a very relevant passage. Clearly there were times when the Old Testament prophets did not fully understand what they were writing, but they wanted to know and had some understanding that they were speaking of the coming Messiah and God’s ultimate salvation of his people.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. In fact, we see this kind of confidence based on partial revelation very early on. I think most everyone knows the story of Job, a righteous man whom God allowed Satan to test with extreme trials. In Job 19:25-27 we read that in the midst of his suffering, Job said, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes—I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” He clearly understood that God had promised his people a Savior, and that he would one day see this Savior himself.

Marc Roby: This is a clear illustration of the point we have made before, that there was a progressive revelation of truth throughout the Old Testament. Job knew enough, but not as much as people in later times.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. People in the Old Testament times knew of God’s promised Messiah to some degree, but the prophets and psalmists wrote things that they themselves didn’t completely understand. The passage in Psalm 16 that you noted is one such passage, and Psalm 22 has several. But, as with many of these passages, it is mixture of things that did have an immediate meaning and other things that may not have had immediate meaning. For example, in Psalm 22:11-13 we read David crying out to God, “Do not be far from me, for trouble is near and there is no one to help. Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions tearing their prey open their mouths wide against me.” These “bulls of Bashan” and “roaring lions” could certainly be figurative expressions for some of the serious troubles and opposition that David himself experienced, so they had an immediate application. But then, in Verse 16, we read, “Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.” It is hard to imagine that the reference to having his hands and feet pierced applied to David in any way, but it has long been recognized, along with other parts of that psalm, as referring to the crucifixion of Christ.

Marc Roby: And it might be useful to point out that crucifixion was introduced by the Romans, and therefore it was not a form of punishment known to David.

Dr. Spencer: That is useful to know. It might also be useful to point out that we have good biblical warrant for applying this psalm to Jesus' crucifixion since he himself quoted from it while on the cross! His famous cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is a direct quote from Verse 1.

So, to summarize our answer to this question, let me say the following. There is only one correct meaning to a biblical passage, but it may have application both to the time it was written, say by an Old Testament prophet or psalmist, and an application to a later time. It may be a bit of a matter of semantics to some extent, but I would not call that having multiple meanings.

Marc Roby: Alright, so we are ready to move on with our topic of hermeneutics. We ended last time with an example of some truly awful exegesis, which attempted to show that homosexuality is not condemned by the Bible. Are there any other types of bad exegesis that it would be useful to examine?

Dr. Spencer: We could come up with quite a few very easily, but let's just do one more really bad example, in fact, this one is blasphemous. But I think it is useful to look at this because those of us who are truly Christians need to know about this kind of terrible, deadly and demonic teaching and oppose it at every turn. This teaching has to do with what is called the "little god" doctrine of the so-called word of faith movement.

Marc Roby: That is about as unbiblical and illogical as any false doctrine I can think of.

Dr. Spencer: It most certainly is. I want to look at how one of these word of faith ministers attempts, with no success I might add, to exegete Genesis 1 Verses 26 and 27, which say "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."

Marc Roby: This should be interesting.

Dr. Spencer: It is interesting in a very twisted and sad way. In a Youtube video of the teaching of Creflo Dollar, who is the head of the World Changers Church, he was attempting to exegete that passage and said, "If everything produces after its own kind, we now see God producing man. And if God now produces man, and everything produces after its own kind [and he takes a long pause for effect here] ... if horses get together, they produce what? [and the crowd answers – horses] And if dogs get together they produce what? [and the crowd answers – dogs] If cats get together, they produce what? [and the crowd answers – cats] But if the godhead gets together and say [sic] let us make man, then what are they producing? [and the crowd answers – gods, and he says] They're producing gods."²

² Quoted from a video clip of the teaching of Creflo Dollar, shown in the video *The Devilish Puppet Master of the Word-Faith Movement* by Justin Peters (start around 26 minutes and 13 seconds in) - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOTrMSOrYew&list=PL-ofi4letEUkH6jD268Q7F5Lp-1WxPqPh>, also available by itself at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YwBroSyWuQ>

Marc Roby: That is unbelievably bad and downright evil.

Dr. Spencer: It is so bad that it's hard to know where to start in demolishing this supposed logic. God's act of creation cannot be compared with the procreation of animals and human beings, they are not at all the same kind of process. These are totally different things, so the supposed connection made, I might add with a lot of knowing pauses and winking as though his answer should be obvious to all, this supposed connection is completely false. We are given a little more information about the creation of man in Genesis 2:7 where we read that "the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." Now, when animals and human beings procreate, we do not take some dust, mold it into our offspring and breathe life into it. So that verse alone ought to completely destroy this nonsensical conclusion. But, in addition, what on earth would cause any human being to think that he or she is a little god?

Marc Roby: You have to have a very strange idea of who God is.

Dr. Spencer: You most certainly do. Now, to be fair, they claim that they are gods with a little 'g', but what on earth does that mean? The Bible tells us that we are made in the image of God. That is, admittedly, a difficult thing to fully explain. But we are not little gods. In fact, this little god doctrine sounds eerily similar to Satan's original lie to tempt Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:5 we read that Satan told them that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would not die but that "when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Marc Roby: It didn't work out so well for Adam and Eve when they listened to that lie.

Dr. Spencer: And it won't work out well for people who listen to it today either. If any of our listeners have fallen prey to this false teaching, I want to exhort them to read the Bible themselves, carefully, from beginning to end. The creator-creature distinction is central to the entire Bible. In Isaiah 43:10 we read, "'You are my witnesses,' declares the LORD, 'and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me.'"

But these word of faith preachers take being gods – even with a little g – seriously. They talk about being able to control the weather and change their physical circumstances with their words. That is simply nonsense. If it were so, why do any of them need to ask for financial donations? Why do any of them ever get sick and die? The reality is that they are liars and they deceive people, and they abuse the Word of God by trying to claim that they are believing what it says. But they pull verses out of context and interpret them without any concern for what the rest of the Word of God says.

Marc Roby: I might add that in Deuteronomy 4:39 we are told, "Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other."

Dr. Spencer: And if you search in the 1984 NIV for the phrase "there is no other", you will find twelve verses that say essentially the same thing. This teaching could not possibly be more in conflict with God's word. And, I might add, it could also not be more in conflict with common sense and observable facts either. Can these people truly control the weather? I think we've spent

more time on this than it deserves already. There are many places on the web where you can find detailed refutations of this heretical and blasphemous teaching, so I really don't need to say any more.

Marc Roby: Very well. We've been through a couple examples of bad exegesis, but is there anything more that you want to say about hermeneutics so that we can avoid exegetical mistakes?

Dr. Spencer: Before we summarize the most important points, I would like to make one more observation.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: There are passages in the Bible that are deliberately enigmatic, meaning that they are difficult to understand. I'm not referring to topics that are in and of themselves difficult to understand, but I'm speaking about sayings that are deliberately enigmatic, independent of the complexity of the material.

Marc Roby: Why would God want to make anything difficult for us to understand?

Dr. Spencer: There are different reasons, but certainly one is that if we have to struggle a bit to understand something, we will remember it better and understand it more completely. It is a bit of an old joke among professors that if you explain something too clearly the students are deceived into believing that they understand it. But if you botch the explanation a bit they are forced to think it through and have a better understanding.

Marc Roby: Now that sounds like something a professor would say to justify a poor job of teaching!

Dr. Spencer: That is how it is always used in a joke of course, but there actually is an element of truth to it. I can remember some of the best teachers I had explaining something in class so well that I really thought I understood it. But then, when I went to apply it myself, all of a sudden, the understanding just seemed to vanish. In any event, when we come across something that forces us to slow down and think to figure it out, it is a really good way of emphasizing the material. In fact, if I understand a sentence immediately, I may read it so fast that it doesn't sink in at all and I won't remember it. But, if I have to stop and re-read it a few times to figure out what it means, I'm more likely to remember what it says.

Marc Roby: I can certainly agree with that, although we want to be careful to not use it as an excuse for sloppy writing or poor explanations. You said that there are different reasons though, what is another?

Dr. Spencer: A second reason is to make the heart of the listener manifest. In Matthew Chapter 13 we are told that Jesus' disciples came to him and asked him why he spoke in parables. He replied, in Verses 11-14, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.'" In

them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.’”

We see from this that Jesus was, in a sense, making it difficult for those who had no interest in understanding what he said so that they would not bother to figure things out and would remain willfully ignorant of the true gospel, but those who wanted to understand would take the time to figure the parables out, or would ask that they be explained, and would thereby be enlightened.

Marc Roby: In other words, by using parables, Jesus revealed the heart attitude of his hearers.

Dr. Spencer: That is a good way to put it. In his book *Interpreting the Bible*, Mickelsen³ has an entire chapter on what he calls opaque figures of speech. He includes in that chapter riddles, fables and enigmatic sayings.

Marc Roby: What else do you want to say about hermeneutics?

Dr. Spencer: We could go on and on, but I think this is good enough for an introduction to the topic and hopefully to whet our listener’s appetites to study more and to be very careful and systematic in their own Bible study.

Marc Roby: Perhaps it would be good to very briefly summarize the most important points we’ve covered.

Dr. Spencer: I think that’s a great idea. The first, and by far the most important, rule of hermeneutics is that we should allow Scripture to interpret Scripture. Remember that we said you can also express this rule by saying that Scripture is a unity and cannot contradict itself. This idea is also well stated in Chapter 1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is entitled, Of the Holy Scripture. In Paragraph 9 of that chapter we read that “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.”

Marc Roby: As always, the Westminster confession does a great job of stating that idea. What else is important to remember?

Dr. Spencer: First let me add something to the first rule. I want to point out that it is dependent on our having a very high view of Scripture. In fact, the first rule is a necessary result of and depends on our belief that the Bible, in its entirety, is the infallible Word of God. Then, in addition to the first rule, I would have to say that I think your attitude in studying the Bible is most important. You must have an attitude of humility and you must truly be seeking to know God’s will so that you can go out and do it. Thirdly, we need to pray for the Holy Spirit to help us. Remember what it says in 1 Corinthians 2:14, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Fourthly, I would say to make use of the existing creeds and confessions, and to study systematic theology. Fifthly, I would remind

³ A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974

our listeners that we must all be in a good church under the authority of godly leaders. If these things are all in place, you will do well and avoid the many theological ditches out there.

Marc Roby: This has been an enjoyable introduction to the topic of hermeneutics and I am really looking forward to next time, when we start into systematic theology.

Dr. Spencer: I'm looking forward to it as well.

Marc Roby: I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We'd love to hear from you.