

Understanding Our Bibles

Text: 2 Timothy 2:14-19

By Pastor Trent Boedicker

Do you like puzzles? When I was a kid, I always enjoyed getting a cereal box with crosswords or riddles or word searches printed on the back. I guess it kept me entertained while I was eating breakfast. But my favorite, by far, was the box that had a hidden message. At first glance it was just a jumbled and confusing mess, but underneath those dots and squiggly lines and different colored shapes there was a secret to uncover. You could stare at it all morning, but it wouldn't make any sense, unless you opened up the box, sifting through the cereal, to find the special decoder glasses. They didn't look like much: just a flimsy cardboard frame with red plastic lenses. That's all it took, however. Everything became clear as you wore those glasses over your eyes, and instantly you were able to decipher the meaning. It was usually something silly like, "Buy more Frosted Flakes... They're Great!!!"

Sometimes people have the wrong impression of the Bible. They might think of it as a puzzle, too complicated and confusing, to understand. Maybe someone has told them to leave it to the experts, claiming that its content is too deep and mysterious for the average person to comprehend, so they don't even try. They are content to let others tell them what it means, and their Bible ends up sitting on the bookshelf collecting dust. It's not that they don't want to learn about the Lord or grow in their walk with him, but they are intimidated to open the pages of Scripture and read it for themselves. Is that really how it's supposed to be? If God wanted to communicate with us, would he give us a book that is difficult and confusing and beyond our ability to understand? No. The Bible wasn't written just for the experts, it was written for common people, and if we are willing to spend time in his Word, we will discover that he is speaking to us.

Christian author Wayne Grudem talks about the clarity of Scripture and he explains,

Anyone who has begun to read the Bible seriously will realize that some parts can be understood very easily while other parts [can] seem puzzling... But it would be a mistake to think that Scripture in general is difficult to understand. In fact, the OT and NT frequently affirm that Scripture is written in such a way that its teachings are able to be understood by ordinary believers... This truth should give great encouragement to all Christians to read their Bibles daily and with great eagerness. We should never assume that only... pastors or Bible scholars, are able to understand the Bible rightly..."ⁱ

We're going to spend time this morning looking at some basic principles that will help us better understand our Bibles. I don't have special decoder glasses to give you, and to be honest, you don't need them. These are common sense principles that help us to read, interpret, and apply God's Word to our lives.

In our passage this morning, the apostle Paul challenges his friend Timothy to pay attention to the way he handles Scripture. His task as a pastor and teacher was to help others better understand the good news. Paul warned that there are some who have wandered away from the

faith twisting the message of Christ. But Timothy had a responsibility to study the Bible with diligence so that he would be able to understand and explain what he read to others.

This is a passage that speaks to pastors today. Sometimes we hear a sermon on the radio or the television and that makes us wonder, “wait a minute, is that really what the passage is saying?” The apostle reminds those who teach that we are accountable to God for the way we handle the Bible. There is a right way and a wrong way to handle the Scriptures, and I am called to be worker who has no reason to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.

But these verses apply to all believers, telling us that we should be intentional about the way we approach God’s Word.

The first principle for understanding the Bible is to examine the context.

That means stepping back, and seeing the big picture, rather than isolating a single phrase or verse from the surrounding passage. If I want to understand what something means I need to look at what comes before and what follows after. That might involve reading several paragraphs or the entire chapter, or maybe even the whole book. If we ignore the context it is easy to get confused.

In verses 17 and 18 the apostle mentions a couple of men who were causing problems by twisting the gospel. He says, “...*their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some.*”

Whoever these teachers might have been, they were stirring us trouble by distorting the words of the apostles. We don’t know the exact nature of the false message they were spreading, but apparently it had something to do with the resurrection. Maybe they were telling people that there is no future resurrection from the dead because we have already been raised spiritually with Christ. We can imagine Paul telling them to pay attention to what the word of God actually says, rather than quoting bits and pieces of what they had heard to make it sound like their message was biblical.

We call this proof-texting, when someone take a verse out of context in order to make a point. I read a blog awhile back about how we can be guilty of proof texting without even realizing it. A pastor was doing some shopping at the local Christian bookstore and found a nice bookmark, the kind you might give to a friend or family member as a gift. There was a picture printed on the front along with a Bible verse from Genesis 31:49 which says, “May the Lord keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other.” Isn’t that a sweet sentiment, especially for someone who lives far away. “We may not see each other as often as we would like, but I know the Lord is watching over you.” This is certainly true, but the problem is that’s not what that verse is about. It comes from a passage where Jacob is returning to the promised land with his family, meanwhile his angry father-in-law is chasing him down. Laban was furious that Jacob was leaving, and when he caught up with them, he said “I may not there in person, but

I'm warning you, if you mistreat my daughters you'll have to answer to the Lord." All of that sudden that bookmark at the Christian bookstore doesn't seem so sweet. I don't know, maybe it's something a dad might want to give to his son in law? "May the Lord keep watch between you and me, buddy!"

That example might not seem like a big deal but there are plenty of times when taking a verse out context can cause serious confusion. Maybe you've heard a preacher on TV say that if you have enough faith, God will do anything you ask. He quotes John 14:14 to prove his point, "If you ask me anything in my name I will do it" (NASB). See, the preacher says, all you have to do is name it and claim it. But that's not what the verse is telling us. Or maybe you've heard someone argue, "I can live however I want and no one has a right to tell me I'm wrong. Doesn't the Bible say, 'Judge not lest ye be judged?'" Yes, Jesus makes that statement in Matthew 7:1 but he most certainly was not giving people permission to live however they pleased.

Context matters. What if you received a letter in the mail from a friend? "Oh, how nice, so and so wrote to tell us how they're doing." You open the envelope and unfold the paper. It's kind of a long letter, a couple of pages. You are kind of in a hurry, and so for now you just scan through it for the highlights. Your friend begins by talking about his family, giving an update on what his wife has been up to. You skip down a couple of paragraphs and find an interesting line that says, "She's been so faithful over the years but has been falling apart lately." That's too bad, you tell yourself, "she did look a little tired last time we saw them." Skipping down a few more lines your friend says, "I hate to say it but it's time to trade her in for a new model." What!!! You can't believe it. How could your friend write something so terrible? You back up and read from the beginning, and realize he isn't talking about his wife, he is telling you about his old pickup truck. After driving it for so many years it is finally falling apart and it is time to visit the dealer so he buy a new truck. "Oh, that makes a little more sense."

See how important context can be? Seems obvious but its easy to forget. Slow down when you're reading the Bible. Pay attention to what comes before and what comes after. Ask questions like: who, what, when, where, why, and how. It just might help clear up confusion, or keep you from misunderstanding something important.

Another principle is to read the Bible literally.

In other words, we should look for the plain meaning of the text; take it at face value, the way you would normally read a book. Hold your place here in 2 Timothy, but turn back for a moment to Proverbs 8:8-9 (NASB)... Proverbs 8:8 says: *"All the utterances of my mouth are in righteousness; There is nothing crooked or perverted in them. They are all straightforward to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge."*

The passage assures us that God's Word is reliable. We can take it seriously, knowing that the Lord isn't trying to confuse or mislead us in any way. The message is straightforward to those who seek to understand it. We don't have to make it more complicated than it is, searching for some deeper or hidden meaning behind every passage. God says what he means and means what he says.

Someone might say, “I know that passage tells us Jonah was swallowed by a whale, but perhaps it’s just an allegory. What it’s really saying is that sometimes in life it can feel like we are being swallowed up by our whale-sized problems.” --No... the passage is actually telling us that there was a literal prophet named Jonah who got on a boat and ran from God, and when he was thrown overboard he was swallowed by a great fish, and the Lord supernaturally rescued him, giving him a second chance to deliver his message to the people of Nineveh. It really happened, just like God said that it did. There is no reason to try to explain anything away or give it some other meaning. I believe God is truthful in everything that he says. If these events didn’t actually happen, he wouldn’t tell us that it did. --Now certainly there are all kinds of lessons we can learn from Jonah’s life. The book teaches us about having compassion for the lost and following the Lord even when we don’t understand his commands. It teaches us that God is gracious and willing to forgive when we have gone astray. Those are all applications that we can take away from the book. But we know these lessons are true because this is how God worked in Jonah’s life.

Some people might object: “You don’t really take the Bible literally. Jesus said, ‘I am the door.’ Do you think he’s made out oak or something?” No. That’s obviously a figure of speech and figures of speech are a normal part of communication. When talk to each other we sometimes spice things up with a metaphor to help people better understand what we’re trying to tell them. But it’s usually quite obvious. We realize that Jesus doesn’t mean he is the front door of your home, but he is making a very real statement that we enter a relationship with God through him. Figures of speech are there to clarify the meaning, not to introduce some secret or hidden meaning.

When you pick up the sports section of a newspaper, how do you read what’s in front of you? An article might summarize a recent basketball game, where one team came from behind to defeat their rival by a score of 97 to 95. You don’t tell yourself, “I wonder if this is an allegory for the spiritual struggle that exists between good and evil? Sometimes the other team does seem to have the upper hand, but if we refuse to give up we will prevail in the end.” No, you read it in a plain or normal way. Now there be figures of speech sprinkled throughout the article. The author might tell you that one player was on fire. But you know what that means. It’s not telling you his jersey burst into flames, it means that he scored a lot of points. Figures of speech are a normal part of communication, and point to something real.

There are places where the Bible uses symbols or metaphors or figures of speech, but they are usually there to help us better understand the meaning rather than introducing some allegorical meaning.

Charles Ryrie offers several reasons for why we should understand the Bible in a normal or literal sense.ⁱⁱ For one thing, God created human beings with capacity to communicate. Not only did he give us this ability so that we could relate to each other but also so that he could relate to us. Doesn’t it make sense that God who created language would use it in its normal sense to accomplish that purpose? He’s not going to hide the true message behind layers of allegory. He says what he means and means what he says.

Another reason to read the Bible literally is because that's how Jesus and the apostles took it. They were constantly pointing to promises that were made in the OT, telling us these things were literally fulfilled just as God said it would happen. The prophecies that spoke of the first coming of Christ were all fulfilled literally, and so it only makes sense that the prophecies concerning his second coming will also be fulfilled in the same way.

Another reason to read the Bible literally is that if a passage doesn't actually mean what it says, how do we determine its actual meaning? If the book of Jonah isn't really about a prophet who was swallowed by a whale, but an allegory meant to convey some deeper message, what's it about? Is it about dealing with whale sized problems? Is it about how we can take a wrong turn in our journey through life? Who is saying what it really means, and why is your interpretation any better than mine? If we approach the Bible as a collection of allegories, then the meaning becomes subjective. But if we believe this is God's Word, we need to let God speak and listen to what he has to say.

One writer says,

The most basic rule of biblical interpretation that we can follow is that we should interpret the Bible literally. What does this mean? Essentially, we are not to treat Scripture like a secret code book; rather, we are to read the Bible as we would read any other work of literature. In other words, our goal is to read the Scriptures according to the intent of its authors and the literary conventions of the particular style that is being used... In reading the Bible literally, our goal is to get at the plain sense of the text. Scripture is divinely inspired and contains the content we need to know for salvation. This does not mean, however, that there is a secret method for discerning the Bible's meaning... Read the Bible as you would read other books, and its essential meaning will be plain to you.ⁱⁱⁱ

A third principle for understanding the Bible is to recognize its divisions.

If we go back to 2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV), the apostle Paul says, "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*" The King James phrases it: "rightly dividing the Word of truth." which reminds us that the Bible presents a unified message that unfolds through a series of stages or dispensations.

It's kind of like reading a great novel. It tells one story, but that story is broken into a number of chapters that advance the plot in some way. You may be introduced to new characters when you turn to the next chapter, or there may be a new twist in the story that you didn't see coming, but when you get to the end it all fits together and comes to a beautiful conclusion. When you pick up the book, you don't jump back and forth, turning to random pages. The story wouldn't make any sense to you if you did. You pay attention to where you are in the story. "Okay, I'm in chapter 2, this is the part where this happens..."

And we need to have a basic awareness of where we are in the story of redemption if the Bible is going to make sense to us. God created a perfect universe, but humanity fell into sin, so God made a promise to save us. He raised up the nation of Israel and revealed his Law showing us our need for mercy. At just the right moment he sent his son to die on the cross for our sins. Now he is reaching out to all nations with the message of his grace, drawing people everywhere into a relationship with him. One day he will bring his plan to completion, restoring the universe as it was meant to be. If we were going to give a title to the most basic divisions of the Bible, we might name them: Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom. It's important to know where we fit into this story today, and when we read the Bible it's important to recognize what part of the story we are reading about.

If we don't recognize these divisions the Bible might seem like a confusing book. You might be reading along in the book of Leviticus one day where instructions are given for the type of animal sacrifices God's people were commanded to bring in the OT. "I wonder why don't we bring an unblemished lamb to church when we worship the Lord," you ask yourself. "Am I being disobedient by not sprinkling blood on the altar?" No. Please, I beg you, do not bring an animal sacrifice with you on Sunday morning. Those commands belong to a different chapter in the story of redemption. We no longer are required to do so because Christ shed his blood for us once and for all on the cross of Calvary, and those earlier sacrifices were only shadow that pointed to the work he would accomplish. Recognizing these divisions helps us to understand the Bible.

Or you might be reading another passage where the people of Israel were given a list of clean and unclean foods. One of things they were commanded not to eat is pork. Pigs were considered an unclean animal and God's people were to exclude it from their diet. It's one of the things that made them distinct from the other nations. But then you come to the NT, and run across the verse in 1 Timothy 4 where it says that all kinds of food created by God are good and nothing is to be rejected if received with thanksgiving. Which is it? Am I allowed to cook up the rack of baby back ribs I have in my refrigerator or should I throw them away? This would be a confusing problem, if I didn't recognize the divisions of the Bible. Those dietary commands belong to a different chapter of the story, but in the present chapter where we fit in, all foods have been declared clean. So I guess I'm cooking up those baby back ribs this afternoon, and I'm going to enjoy them giving thanks to God who created it.

When people say that the Bible is confusing or full of contradictions it's often because they're not paying attention to these divisions. But rightly dividing the word of truth helps us to make sense of what we read.

One author has given helpful advice. He says,

"It shall greatly help ye to understand the Scriptures if thou mark not only what is spoken or written, but of whom and to whom, with what words, at what time, where, to what intent, with what circumstances, considering what goeth before and what followeth after."^{iv}

One more principle for understanding the Bible is to allow the Holy Spirit to enlighten us.

It gives us confidence knowing that studying the Bible is not something we do on our own. The Holy Spirit indwells believers, and as we read, he gives us insight and understanding. In 1 Corinthians 2:12 (ESV) we are told: *“Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.”*

Have you ever had one of those “Aha!” moments as you’re doing devotions. A verse speaks to you so clearly. Maybe you’ve read the passage before, and never completely understood what it was saying, but all of the sudden it’s like the lightbulb has come on and it makes sense to you. Not only do you realize what it is saying, but you also see how it applies to your life. We can’t take credit for those experiences. It isn’t our wisdom or intellect that made this amazing discovery. It is the ministry of the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to God’s truth and brings conviction to our hearts.

Isn’t encouraging to know that you don’t have to be a scholar to understand the Bible? You have the world’s greatest teacher at your side, guiding you in your study: the Holy Spirit of God.

And so if you’re struggling to understand a passage of Scripture, ask the Lord to give you insight. It would be a good habit for us, before we begin reading, to pray “open my eyes, Lord, so that I might see what you want me to see.”

You Don’t Need Decoder Glasses –

Well I haven’t given you a special set of decoder glasses this morning to help you read the Bible, because that’s not what is required for us to understand God’s Word. We simply need to come with a heart that is eager to hear his voice. And if we follow these basic principles, it will go a long way in helping us to accurately handle the word of truth.

Don’t be intimidated by the Bible, thinking it is too deep or mysterious to comprehend. Open its pages and start reading, expecting the Lord to speak to your heart.

Be careful not to take verses out of context. Instead of trying to make the Bible say what you want it to say, allow Scripture to speak for itself.

And don’t just read for the sake of knowledge alone. Apply what you learn to your life, allowing God’s Spirit to shape and mold you into the person he has called you to be.

ⁱ (Grudem, “Systematic Theology” p.105-109)

ⁱⁱ Summarized in “Understanding Your Bible,” by MacDonald, S. Craig, p.5-7

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/interpreting-bible-literally/>

^{iv} Miles Coverdale quoted by Charles Baker in “Dispensational Relationships, p.8)