

Principles of Understanding and Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

Foundational Thoughts

1. God wants us to understand prophecy.

“The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place.” Revelation 1:1 (NKJV)

2. The Holy Spirit was sent to resource us to understand prophecy.

“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things.” 1 John 2:20 (NKJV)

¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. ¹³ These things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. 1 Corinthians 2:11-13 (NKJV)

²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. John 14:26 (NKJV)

3. The Holy Scriptures are verbally inspired that we might understand prophecy.

¹⁶ All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NKJV)

¹⁹ And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; ²⁰ knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, ²¹ for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were* moved by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1:19-21 (NKJV)

Principles of Biblical Interpretation

1. Interpret Scripture literally.

“The literal method of interpretation is that method that gives to each word the same exact basic meaning it would have in normal, ordinary, customary usage... It is call the grammatical-historical method to emphasize... that the meaning is to be determined by both grammatical and historical considerations.” J. Dwight Pentecost

- Literal interpretation assumes that God based His revelatory message on the normal rules of human communication, because He wants people to comprehend His revelation.
- What about figures of speech in literal interpretation? For example: “Quit beating around the bush.” Or the person in the room saying, “I’m freezing.”

- Literal interpretation is dependent on context. "As an example, "serpent" as a word normally means "animal" and only an animal. But this normal usage and sense does not legislate that "serpent" in Genesis 3:14 must mean merely an animal. On the other hand, a literal system begins with recognizing "serpent" as an animal. Then it looks to the immediate or extended contexts for other clues to the meaning. This serpent speaks (3:1-5), and speaks as the enemy of God. Thus in the literal system, this serpent is more than an animal; it is God's enemy..." Elliott E. Johnson
- Literal truth is learned through symbols.
"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, NKJV)
"There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, And a Branch shall grow out of his roots." (Isaiah 11:1, NKJV)
"The literalist does not deny the existence of figurative language. The literalist does, however, deny that such figures must be interpreted so as to destroy the literal truth intended through the employment of the figures." Paul H. Benware
- Symbols communicate truths concisely and graphically.

2. Interpret Scripture by comparing Prophecy with Prophecy.

"knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation," (2 Peter 1:20, NKJV)

Examples: Revelation 20 – a picture of the millennial reign of Christ must be compared to passages

3. Interpret Scripture by understanding timing issues.

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey. I will cut off the chariot from Ephraim And the horse from Jerusalem; The battle bow shall be cut off. He shall speak peace to the nations; His dominion shall be 'from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth.'" (Zechariah 9:9-10, NKJV)

4. Interpret Scripture by understanding double references.

"Then he shall confirm a covenant with many for one week; But in the middle of the week He shall bring an end to sacrifice and offering. And on the wing of abominations shall be one who makes desolate, Even until the consummation, which is determined, Is poured out on the desolate.'" (Daniel 9:27, NKJV)
"Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place" (whoever reads, let him understand)," (Matthew 24:15, NKJV)

5. Interpret Scripture by understanding the proper use of figurative language.

In Light of the immediate context

In light of the larger context

In light of the historical-cultural context