

“Rightly Dividing the Bible”

Part II

When you read the Bible, does it make any sense? Do you think you understand what it is saying? For sure, there are some tough passages in the Bible for all of us, but do you really understand the message within the scriptures? Does it click, or is the Bible to you just a mysterious book full of deep sayings, antiquated language, coded symbols, figures and metaphors?

When the Ethiopian nobleman was returning home from Jerusalem, he was reading the words of the prophet Isaiah. According to **Acts 8**, he was confused. The prophet’s words concerning the coming Christ were a mystery to him, and he had no idea who Jesus was or who on earth Isaiah could possibly be talking about. So, the Lord dispatched the preacher Philip down to the road where the nobleman was riding in his chariot.

Acts 8:30-31 “And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest?”

God’s word wasn’t doing this man much good as it was, because he failed to understand what it was telling him. That is the question I want to pose to you today: Do you understand what you’re reading? The record tells us that Philip climbed up into the chariot with this man, took the scripture which he was reading, and told him all about Jesus. It wasn’t long until this man had figured it out and he wanted to be saved from his sins. They stopped the chariot right there alongside the road and he was baptized by Philip for the remission of his sins. That tells me that it IS possible to understand the Bible; it’s just that sometimes we have to learn how to read and interpret the scriptures. It’s one thing to read the Bible, but it’s another thing to do as the apostle Paul instructed Timothy:

II Timothy 2:15 “...rightly dividing the word of truth.”

Perhaps you’ve heard about the man who really didn’t know much of anything about the Bible. One day, he decided that he was just going to start reading it. His approach was very well intentioned. He just didn’t know where to begin, so he thought, “I’ll just close my eyes and let the Bible fall open, then I’ll run my finger down the page, and whatever I see when I open my eyes, I’ll do what that verse says.” So he closed his eyes, let the Bible fall open, and he felt around on the page. When he opened his eyes, he was looking at **Matthew 27:5** where it tells the tragic story of Judas and how he went out after selling out the Lord to the religious leaders, and he took the money that the chief priests gave him and tried to give it back. When they refused to take it, he threw it down in front of them.

Matthew 27:5 “And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”

Well, the man thought, “Oh, no, no, no, that’s surely not what the Lord intended for me to do,” so he thought he would try again. This time, the Bible fell open and his eyes came to rest on **Luke 10:37**:

“...Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.”

The man realized he had a problem, so he closed the Bible and said, "Surely this doesn't mean for me to do the same as the man who hanged himself! Surely it can't be that!" So he opened the Bible at random again, and this time his eyes fell on **I Thessalonians 5:18**:

"...for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you."

By this time, the man was thoroughly confused and troubled by what he had read in the Bible. But he returned once more to the book and this time, his eyes landed on **John 13:27**:

"...Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly."

Well, such an approach to the Bible left that man feeling more than a little troubled, understandably. You know, that's just about how some people read the scriptures. And that is a very serious matter. I suppose there are passages that nearly all of us have taken for granted through the years. We've heard them quoted, we've memorized them, we've seen them used in a variety of ways, and it may have never occurred to us that that verse doesn't mean anything like what we thought it meant. A deeper look at the passage *in its context* can yield an entirely different understanding of it.

In part one of this study, we noted the division of the Old and New Testaments, and why understanding this delineation is one of the very first steps and is so vital to rightly dividing the Bible and understanding the message of redemption. We also showed the critical importance of reading every passage in its context, and if we don't do that, we are very likely to draw conclusions that lead us away from the truth, and cause us to believe and practice something that's outright false. Just because you quote it from the Bible doesn't mean that you're teaching the truth. A verse without context becomes a pretext, and false doctrines are born and sustained by that kind of careless use of scripture.

The next guideline we want to consider as we rightly divide the word of truth is to always allow the Holy Spirit to be His own interpreter. That is, let the Bible interpret itself. Admittedly, there are some hard statements to unravel within the scriptures. It's not as easy as A,B,C, as we would like for it to be. But, the Bible IS a book to be understood, and we CAN discover what the Bible is saying and teaching if we will simply let the Bible do the explaining. The problem is, we skip that step and we get into the trouble of letting our presuppositions determine what a passage means, instead of allowing the Bible to explain itself.

II Peter 1:20 "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation."

In other words, we can't just make the Bible mean what we want it to mean. You've probably heard people say, "I have MY interpretation, and you have YOURS, and we can both be right. One is just as good as the other." That's just not true.

You see, when we interpret something, that means we're taking something that is in a form or language that is NOT understood and we translate or interpret it into words that we DO understand. However, if we are interpreting the message, the words that we use to explain the concept have to mean the same thing as the words originally used. If someone were to interpret my sermon for someone who speaks

another language, they would have to use words that properly convey the meaning of what I have just said in English. And if they don't, they're not interpreting my thoughts; they're perverting them. The same thing holds true for a Bible interpretation: I must derive the meaning the writer intended.

Now, it's not that the Bible writers wrote in such a way that common people cannot understand it, or that God was trying to convolute His message of salvation and make it some code that nobody could unravel. But, you see, since we live 2,000 years since the time that the Holy Spirit inspired those men to write, we face language barriers and culture barriers that they didn't face in the first century. Unless you're talking about an apocalypse that was purposely written in code language, the Bible was a very practical book, written in practical language for those people. They could readily understand the words of the apostles.

We have to overcome some of these hurdles though, because of the culture that we live in, the time that has passed, and the language that we now speak as opposed to the original languages in which the Bible was written. When I set out to interpret the Bible, I must derive the meaning that the writer intended. I have to let the Bible speak for itself. I cannot take a complex passage and just arbitrarily attach a supposed explanation to it, and pass it off as the truth by saying, "Well, that's what the Bible says." That may not be what the Bible means, because the message has been taken out of its context. If I will look at the passage in the context in which it is written (to whom it is written, the time period in which it is written, the overarching purpose and mission of the book or epistle, etc...) and come to establish those facts and consider the surrounding verses or chapter, I find the key that unlocks the whole thing. I must let the Bible interpret the Bible.

Let's try that on for size.

Ephesians 2:8-9 "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast."

That's what the Bible plainly says. *We are saved by grace*. Make no mistake about it; we are saved—if we are saved—by grace, through faith. I believe that with all of my heart. But does that mean that we are saved by grace unconditionally? Does that mean that somehow, just automatically, we are saved by grace with no faith, no response? Are we saved without man responding to the overtures of God's grace and obeying God in any way? Some tell us that Paul is affirming salvation by grace alone in this passage, but the word "alone" doesn't appear here, nor does it appear anywhere else in the scriptures in such a context. So, what DOES Paul mean? Let's allow the Bible to interpret the Bible.

First of all, Paul says that we are saved by grace "*through faith*." In other words, we are saved by God's grace, or unmerited favor, when we manifest faith in Him. So, already the Bible has shown us that Paul didn't mean that we are saved by grace without ANY conditions. The Bible makes *faith* a condition. The Bible also tells us that faith without works is dead (**James 2:20**). Every example we have of faith in the Bible involves somebody responding to what God told them. When Noah moved *by faith*, he built an ark like God told him to. Abraham was the father of the faithful. What did he do? He followed where God led him to go and took his son, Isaac, up on the mountain to offer him as a sacrifice, though God stopped him at the last second. But he followed *in faith*. It's not just a matter of salvation falling out of

heaven as a free act of grace, although grace IS free; we don't earn it. But we receive that grace conditionally, *by faith*. And faith—saving faith—obeys the Lord. The Bible makes faith a condition.

Titus 2:11 “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men...”

God's grace has appeared to ALL men, Paul says. God desires that ALL would be saved. But are all men going to be saved?

Matthew 7:23 “And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

Jesus is saying that many people will be told to depart, and those who are saved are those who “**do the will of my Father which is in heaven.**” (Matthew 7:21)

So, there it is. God's grace is extended to ALL men. God wants you to be saved, and he's giving you the opportunity—not because you deserve it. You've not done anything and I've not done anything to merit God's favor, God's grace. That comes because God loves us. But you and I do have to respond to the overture of His grace. How? -By having faith in Him. What kind of faith? -Faith that moves us to do His will, faith that responds in humble obedience. Not boastful earning, but in humble, loving obedience.

When we allow the Bible to interpret the Bible, we can understand what the writer was saying. Let me give you another brief example.

I Corinthians 11:14-15 “Doth not nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.”

Now, there are fifteen verses here where Paul goes through this entire subject, and it's worthy of sitting down and studying it. But just to capsule it, Paul says that a woman's long hair is a *glory* to her. Have you ever wondered what Paul had in mind when he used the phrase “*long hair?*” After all, what's long to one person isn't so long in the eyes of another. Well, the Greek word for *long* in that passage is not an adjective. Rather, it is a verb, denoting an action. It means *to let the hair grow*. Let's see if the Bible gives us some clue as to what Paul might have been thinking about.

Numbers 6:5 “All the days of the vow of his separation there shall no razor come upon his head: until the days be fulfilled, in the which he separateth himself unto the Lord, he shall be holy, and shall let the locks of the hair of his head grow.”

In this passage, Moses is giving instructions concerning the vow of the Nazarite. Samson was under that vow, and we remember that story very well, how he broke that vow when Delilah cut his hair and he lost his strength. So, it appears that what Paul was referring to in **I Corinthians 11** was *hair allowed to grow*, instead of being cut. Again, a passage that many would see as very mysterious and strange becomes clearer when we allow the Bible to interpret itself.

Finally, if I want to rightly divide the Bible, I'll be much more successful if I resolve to go from the simple to the complex. I need to learn the basic things first, then graduate to weightier matters. That is key to rightly dividing the Bible. Like a child, I have to drink milk first until I develop the ability to consume other foods. The mistake a lot of people make is that they try to plunge right into some of the deepest, most symbolic passages and subjects in the Bible. Some people want to understand the book of Revelation before they even understand what to do to be saved.

I've sat across kitchen tables from people whom I desperately wanted to bring to an obedient, saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and teach them what to do in order to become a Christian. But they really weren't interested in hearing about all of that. They just wanted to know what the mark of the beast is, or for me to explain the various symbols of the book of Revelation. Well, that's a mistake because it will lead to a gross misinterpretation of the book of Revelation if a study of that book is not built upon some foundational knowledge of the scheme of redemption into the kingdom of God.

The book of Revelation contains some difficult language. It is written in signs and symbols and so forth. But the overall message of Revelation is really not all that difficult, especially if you understand the kingdom of God and the gospel system. There are a lot of explanations and theories out there about Revelation though, that are based on a very literalistic reading of that book, that totally lay aside truths taught in other books of the Bible. Therefore, people build whole denominations upon their supposed interpretations of Revelation, and that really is an abuse of the book of Revelation. They never stop to think about the fact that the book of Revelation was written to the early persecuted church, and that John was told that the things he was being inspired to write were to come to pass *shortly*. When we lay that aside, we come up with doctrines such as dispensational pre-millennialism, which teaches that the kingdom has not yet come to earth, but that Jesus will one day come to earth and bring the kingdom, set it up and reign from Jerusalem for a thousand years. The proof text for that is **Revelation 20:4**:

“And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God, and which had not worshipped the beast, neither his image, neither had received his mark upon their foreheads, or in their hands; and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.”

Keep in mind, the book of Revelation by its own admission is a book that contains symbolic language in order to keep its message out of the hands of the church's persecutors, her enemies in the first century; yet, to convey a rich message to the persecuted church. The book of Revelation foretells the defeat of Christ's enemies; therefore, it would be written in such a way that those enemies would not understand it.

People want to take the concept of a 'thousand year reign' literally, but friend, if that is the case, a look back at the passage will show that to be taken literally, a person would have to be beheaded to be a part of that 'thousand year reign.' If not, why not? Why is one statement general and symbolic, and the other not?

Here's another important point about that: the city of Jerusalem, the kingdom of God, the throne of David...those things are nowhere mentioned in **Revelation 20**. So, what DOES it mean? I can briefly tell

you what it DOESN'T mean: this symbolic passage does not teach anything that contradicts the simple and plain statements or teachings of the Bible about the kingdom of Christ. The scriptures plainly teach that Christ's kingdom was to be established in the lifetime of His apostles nearly 2,000 years ago.

Mark 9:1 "And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power."

John 18:36 "Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world..."

It would not be an earthly kingdom, like other nations; it is a spiritual kingdom that exists in the hearts of men. When you come up with an "interpretation" supposedly, of the book of Revelation that does away with the foundational truth that Christ brought His kingdom to this earth when He ascended back to heaven, during the lifetime of the apostles, when it came with power in the city of Jerusalem, when the apostles received the power of the Holy Spirit...when you lay all of that aside to come up with some meaning of the book of Revelation, you are wrongly interpreting that book. You see, if we approach the Bible logically, moving from the simple to the complex, from the known to the unknown, one discovery unlocks the next.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that if we are to ever understand the Bible, we must absolutely read it with an open and an honest heart. To the sincere student, the Bible is an inexhaustible book of treasures, and he reads the Bible with the attitude, "Speak Lord, your servant hears." Do you read the Bible everyday with the expectation of learning something? Is your heart open to what God has to say in His word—even if it means you've been wrong and you have to change something? Maybe you have to change your religion; are you that sincere? Do you use the Bible to prop up your present religion, your denomination? Do you look for statements in the Bible to validate what you already believe?

Friend, only the sincere student will unlock the unsearchable treasures of God's word. Only the person who sits down with this book with a mind to rightly divide it and to truly understand what God is saying—only he will understand the word of God. I hope that you'll resolve to do that today, and that you will learn to rightly divide the word of truth.