

## How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

I confess that I stole the title from a book co-authored by one of my teachers, Dr. Douglas Stuart. It is a great book and I certainly recommend that book. The Bible is the most read book in the world, but it is also one of the most misread books in the world. The extreme example is presented in a manner of joke. One man decided to open his Bible randomly every day. Whatever attracts his eyes first is God's word for him on that day. One day, he opened the Bible and the sentence he saw first was, "So, Judas. . . went away and hanged himself." (Matthew 27:5). The man was puzzled so he opened the Bible again, then the following words came to his eyes. "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:37) He couldn't believe that it was from God, so he opened the Bible again. He saw "What you are about to do, do quickly." (John 13:28) That is a joke, but it makes us think. Too many times, Christians read Bible in a way that the Bible was not intended to be read.

### How to Read Bible

Then, how do we read Bible? The answer is simple—just like any other book. Some people react to this comment. "Bible is a holy book, how can we read it like other books?" My answer is: yes, Bible is a holy book, but being a holy book means that its content is different from other books, not the method of reading. There is only one way of to read any book, and if Bible is written in a form of a book (or books to be more precise), it should be read in that way. What is the way that a book is read? It should be read as the author has intended. If we read *Hamlet*, we try to see what Shakespeare wanted to say. In the same way, we have to ask what the authors of the Bible wanted to say in each book or passage of Bible. Unfortunately, many readers of Bible (including some preachers) are not interested in finding out the author's intention, but mainly ask the question "What can I learn from it?" It is true that we have to ask that question at the end, but if we ask that question before finding out the author's intention, we are likely to answer that question wrongly. In finding out the author's intention, we have to pay attention in three important matters.

First, each book of Bible is written by a particular person with particular audience in mind. Unlike many other religious books, Bible does not claim to transcend history. On the contrary, Bible is written in very historic terms, giving clear historical background. Therefore, to read Bible correctly, it is important to know historical and situational background in which the book is written. While for many Old Testament books, it is hard to know this background precisely (we are not even sure about authors of some books), we at least have general ideas. For most New Testament books, we have more precise information. It will be a hard work to find out this information. Thankfully, scholars have done this work for us. For general readers, easy thing to do is to get a copy of a study Bible and read the introduction to each book of the Bible.

Second, we have to remember that you can understand books well when you read the whole book. It will be unwise to read only the last scene of *Hamlet* (without any knowledge about previous parts) and try to understand why all these people die. In order to understand a passage, you have to know what the topic of that book is and what comes before and after that passage. Usually each book of the Bible is considered one unit. There are exceptions. Each psalm is a different unit. In some parts of Proverbs, each verse should be read separately. Luke and Acts are separate units, but still sequel to each other. 1, 2 Samuel and 1,2 Kings can be considered one big unit and so are Moses's five books. 1,2 Chronicles is

definitely one book. There are other considerations, but at least it is wise to read one book together. Furthermore, in reading each passage one has to always bear in mind passages before and after.

Finally, we have to give consideration to the main theme of Bible. Bible's theme is God's glory and his salvation work. Many people, however, are more concerned about moral lessons of Bible than God's glory. In other words, many are not interested about learning about God, but say, "Just tell me what I have to do." The end result is that people read into Bible what they want to see instead of learning from Bible. We have to remember that the Bible is first and foremost teaching about God, and moral lessons are secondary.

### **Some Examples**

Let me proceed now to some solid examples of wrong and right interpretations of Bible. (All examples are from actual teachings. I apologize that I am giving wrong examples from other people without getting their permissions. Some examples come from people I love dearly and thus I don't want to criticize them. Yet, because I have to give actual examples I use them.) The main purpose of gospel narratives is to teach us about Jesus— who he is and what he did. When we are preoccupied with morals, however, we are not so much interested in this topic. Jesus' miracle of five loaves and two fish (John 6:1-15) was written to show who Jesus is. He is almighty God who cares about people's physical need. In John's narrative, this is also an introduction to Jesus' discourse afterwards. Many readers of Bible, however, simply ignore these facts and are more concerned about "the way to see a miracle." They would say "It was because one boy brought bread and fish that the miracle happened, so we should bring something to God as well if we want to see a miracle," thus majoring on minor points.

It is also important to remember that each of the four gospels is one unit. It is not a collection of different reports, but one whole book, so each account should be interpreted in light of what precedes and what follows it. Luke 18 and 19 gives a perfect example. It starts with two parables about prayer, then real stories follow, each of which illustrates teachings of these parables, one way or another. The story of the blind beggar illustrates the teaching of the persistent widow as the beggar was persistent and the beggar was in socially disadvantaged position just as the widow was. However, even better illustration is shown in the case of the rich ruler and Zacchaeus. It is important to note that Luke, unlike Matthew and Mark, describes the rich man as a ruler, thus putting him in the same class as the Pharisee. Zacchaeus, on the other hand is a tax collector just like the one in the parable. Their attitudes and their ends are similar to the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable as well. You can see why this parable was given at this particular place in Luke's gospel. It is also important to note that Zacchaeus' salvation is Jesus' last act before he enters Jerusalem. We can safely say that it was the climax of Jesus' ministry according to Luke's account, then. In other words, Luke put that story at this stage of his narrative to show that Jesus' main ministry was calling sinners to repentance.

Let's move onto epistles. The purpose of epistles is to give some doctrinal teaching to churches in particular situations. Galatians 2:14 should be understood in that light. Paul relates his experience of chiding Peter in order to show how important the doctrine of salvation by faith is. What he said in 1:9 ("As we have already said, so I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally

condemned.ö), he expresses again with a solid example. Of course, Peter did not teach another gospel in this case, and he is not eternally condemned, but even acting as if there is another gospel infuriated Paul and Paul had to correct Peter. Once, however, I heard a preacher saying that what we can learn from this passage is Paul's courage. If we apply the rule of author's intention here, what that preacher is saying is that Paul wrote about this incident to boast about his courage and teach us to follow his example. Certainly, that wasn't Paul's intention, and therefore that shouldn't be our lesson from this passage.

When it comes to the Old Testament, such mistakes are more common. Take, for example, Genesis 34 the incident of rape of Dinah and subsequent revenge of Simeon and Levi. One preacher, in a Bible study, suggested that the lesson that one can learn is that rape and revenge were bad things. The problem with this interpretation is there is nothing in the passage that suggests that it was recorded in order to show how bad rape and revenge were. Surely, the author did not have to record this incident to teach people that rape is bad. The Old Testament history is mainly redemption history. It shows how God worked on the salvation of his people. In that light, this incident makes sense. It is a story of Jacob. Jacob was blessed by God, but he seemed to be getting into trouble all the time. This incident is just another example. When he finally came back to his homeland and thinks that he can live in peace, his sons develop enmity with the local tribe and he has to move again. The next chapter shows the result. Instead of wandering more, he seeks God. He goes back to the place where he first met God at Bethel. There he was re-assured that God was with him. The lesson that we can learn, therefore, is that God's blessing continues even when we seem to be in trouble. There is another purpose of this passage. It shows why the tribe of Judah became a special tribe. Jacob's first son, Reuben, committed adultery and the second and the third sons now put Jacob into trouble through revenge. Therefore, the blessing passed to the fourth son and out of the tribe of Judah comes David and our Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Let's take another example. 2Kings 5 (Naaman's healing) is often used to show the importance of obedience. This seems to be hardly the intention of the author. On the contrary, Naaman's disobedient attitude seems to be spelled out as he obeyed only when his servants urged him. This incident is recorded to show God's glory and how he brings out salvation despite human frailty (not because of human cooperation). It also points that God works miracles even among Gentiles if they come to God. This second message is in contrast to the attitude of Israelites at that time as the Kings of Israel did not trust in God. God honors those who believe him, not those who have blood relationship with Jacob.

### **Common mistakes**

As I pointed earlier, most misinterpretation happens because of human-centeredness in interpretation. Some common forms of this can be described as moralizing, spiritualizing, and allegorizing. We gave some examples of moralizing above. We want to get moral lessons and thus miss the main point. Spiritualizing happens when we want to distinguish spiritual things with physical things. For example, when the Bible exhorts feeding the hungry (e.g. Matthew 25), a reader says, "God cannot be concerned about people's physical needs. He must have meant, 'feed those who hunger for God's words. In other words, preach the gospel.' The truth is that God is also concerned about our physical well-being, and we have to take God's words on its face value.

Allegorizing is closely related to spiritualizing. Since the very beginning of Christian era,

many Christians attempted to interpret the Bible in "öspiritualö ways. When they saw passages that did not seem to give spiritual lessons in their views, they looked for hidden meanings. The classic example is Origen's interpretation of the parable of the good Samaritan. (Luke 11: 25-37) Origen couldn't imagine that Jesus was talking about physical help to others here, so he turned it into an allegory that teaches about Jesus's salvation. According to him, the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho symbolizes us sinners who move from heavenly world to sinful world. Robbers, then are satanic force. The priest and the Levite symbolizes the Law, or sacrifices of the Old Testament. One cannot be saved by them, so one needs the good Samaritan, who is Jesus. Jesus saves the sinner and leaves him at the inn, which is church, and he will come back. This interpretation, of course, is far stretching and is far from the intention of the author.

### **Problems of Application**

As mentioned earlier, one reason that many Christians misinterpret Bible is because they want to jump on to application without understanding the passage. Although that attempt is wrong, that is not saying that application is unimportant. Unless we get application, we get nothing from Bible. Therefore, once we understand the passage, we have to go on to application. Many times, applications are straightforward. For example, if the passage is about God's greatness, application is that we praise his greatness. If the passage is about God's love for us, application is that we enjoy that love and thank God. If it is a warning to us, we take that warning and are careful.

There are some passages, however, that it is hard to draw application, especially in the Old Testament. For example, passages that prophesy doom of certain cities. What is the application for us? The application is that we take the similar warning and examine our own sins. The most difficult part is the Old Testament Law. The moral laws are easy as they still apply to us. The governing laws have some application as they give principles of justice. Although we don't have to and can't apply them directly to our governments, we can still apply principles to our society. The most difficult part is the sacrificial laws (which also include laws of purification and diet). We should not offer sacrifices any more as Jesus is our once and for all sacrifice. What do we get out of these sacrificial laws, then? There are two important applications. One is that Jesus completed all these sacrifices. When we say Jesus is our sacrifice, we mean that he is all these sacrifices - he is our burnt offering, our guilt offering, our sin offering, our peace offering, and our special offerings. By examining the sacrificial laws, we will have a better understanding of what Jesus did for us. Secondly, the sacrificial laws show God's holiness and what God requires from his people. Through these laws, we can learn what reverence we should have of God. We have to learn that God's love is not at the expense of his holiness and learn to revere God.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the history, Bible has been misinterpreted. In fact, misinterpretation is so common that we easily get used to misinterpretation. By the grace of God, usually these misinterpretations do not affect basic Christian doctrines. That does not mean, however, that misinterpretations are OK. Bible is a great book; the more you get out of it, the more it will change your lives. Therefore, it is very important to interpret the Bible correctly.

Unfortunately, most of us are so used to wrong interpretive methods that it is hard to correct them. I was used to them and for last twenty years have tried to correct them, but still make mistakes at times. The fact that most examples I used come from preachers show that it is

difficult even for preachers to get out of this habit. Nevertheless, it can be done and we should strive for it. It is a hard work, but it is definitely a rewarding work.