



III. THE INTERPRETATION OF PROPHECY

A. The Spiritual Requirements of Bible Interpretation

1. Personal faith in Christ—salvation (1 Corinthians 2:14)
2. Faith in the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 11:6)
3. Earnest desire to hear God (Proverbs 18:1)
4. Prayer for guidance (Psalm 119:18)
5. Teaching of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-14; Psalm 36:9)
6. Fear of the Lord (Psalm 25:12, 14; Proverbs 1:7; Proverbs 9:10; Proverbs 15:33)
7. Obedience to revealed truth (John 7:17; John 8:31-32)

B. The Laws of Bible Interpretation

1. The law of the words
 - a. Every word of God is pure (Proverbs 30:5-6). This suggests that each word is unmixed with error or corruption.
 - b. As such, God's choice of word must be given preeminence.
 - c. In our study of scripture, the common biblical use of the word must be accepted, unless weighty and necessary reasons suggest otherwise.
 - d. External tools can be useful, but can prove to be harmful crutches.
 - (1) In the English language, dictionaries provide meanings of words based upon usage common to the time of their publication. At times, the common usage of the time and the scriptural usage align quite nicely, but often this is not the case.
 - (2) The original language resources are not without their own complications. Much is made of the different Greek words for love (*phileo* and *agape*) and how they are used in John 21:15-17. However, a fuller study of the Bible and this passage show these distinctions to be unreliable and unimportant.
 - e. In times where words might have several distinct uses and meanings, the word must be understood specifically in light of its surrounding context.
2. The law of the text
 - a. In our understanding of the layout of scripture, words combine to make a text. This is often encompassed within one Bible verse, but could also include multiple verses, especially when a sentence extends beyond a single verse.
 - b. The key to understanding and interpreting any text is to first consider what it says. This includes understanding the sense of the reading (Nehemiah 8:8).
 - c. This law includes the consideration of sentence structure and punctuation. While grammar books may offer some assistance, it must be understood that scripture does not submit itself to the ever-changing grammatical rules.



3. The law of the context
 - a. All truth must be understood in the light of surrounding truth. This includes history, geography, custom, literary context, purpose of passage, speaker, recipient(s), time, surrounding events, dispensational context, and many other factors.
 - (1) The word of God originated historically and can only be understood in the light of history
 - (2) The place, time, circumstances and prevailing view of the world will naturally color writings produced under these circumstances.
 - (3) We seek to transport ourselves back to conditions and time to enter the author's thoughts without bringing him into the present century.
 - b. Context may be encompassed in one verse, several verses, a chapter or a book.
 - c. As such, we must carefully consider preceding and subsequent parts of the passage. This helps to determine literal or figurative interpretation. Each interpretation must agree with all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27).
4. The law of comparison
 - a. The Bible is a book of principles. One principle that applies in multiple scenarios is that matters and words are better established in the mouths of multiple witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16).
 - b. This principle, when applied to interpretation, involves the search for and implementation of cross-references (1 Corinthians 2:13).
 - c. By adding scriptures one to another truth is multiplied and confirmed. For example, consider the truths learned by comparing Romans 9:27 with Romans 11:26.
5. The law of construction
 - a. Biblical truths must be built upon other Bible truths (Isaiah 28:9-10).
 - b. This principle is related to, but not exactly the same as, the law of comparison. The suggestion of this law is that no doctrine or truth can be fully understood until all parts of the whole are built one upon another.
6. The law of division
 - a. This law is fulfilled in the discipline we commonly call dispensationalism.
 - b. It involves rightly dividing the word of God (2 Timothy 2:15).
 - c. Just as the Bible cannot be rightly interpreted unless corresponding truths are built one upon another, supposed contradictions cannot be rightly dismissed unless differing truths are divided.
7. The law of application
 - a. All scripture is profitable for every believer both doctrinally and practically (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
 - b. The last, but not insignificant, question that we must ask in regards to any scripture is "What does it mean to me?".



C. The Laws of Prophetic Interpretation

1. The law of literal interpretation
 - a. The words of prophecy should be taken in their plain, literal sense unless the text or context gives compelling evidence that the language is figurative.
 - b. Literal interpretation considers the punctuation and the word usage and considers them in their common or standard light unless otherwise led by the scripture.
 - c. Words that are or appear to be archaic in nature are often defined within the context without the need for speculation on the part of the Bible student. For example, in 1 Samuel 9:9-11, a *seer* is defined as a *prophet* before it is used in the story.
 - d. The Bible student who loves the Lord and honours His word should be, in faith and by practice, a literalist, understanding that Bible prophecy is to be taken at face value. Considering the following examples:
 - (1) Josiah (1 Kings 13:1-2; 2 Kings 23:15-16)
 - (2) Cyrus (Isaiah 44:28; Isaiah 45:1-4, 13; 2 Chronicles 36:22-23)
 - (3) Virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:20-23)
 - (4) Voice in the wilderness (Isaiah 40:3; Luke 1:80; Matthew 3:1)
 - e. In order to understand how the Bible uses and explains other unique meanings and interpretations consider how the word *sleep* is used in the following passages.
 - (1) In John 11:1-14, sleep means death.
 - (2) In Jonah 1:5-6, sleep means standard sleep.
 - (3) In Romans 13:8-11, sleep refers to the backslidden condition of one who ignores spiritual things.
 - (4) In 1 Corinthians 11:29-32, sleep again refers to death.
 - f. The opposing viewpoint and approach to literal interpretation is known as allegorical interpretation.
 - (1) This method is perhaps best explained by suggesting that a literary text is given as a vehicle for a secondary, more spiritual, more profound meaning of the scripture.
 - (2) In this method, the interpreter becomes the final authority and potentially stands ready to pervert the true meaning of scripture.
 - (3) In this method of interpretation, there exists at least three dangers.
 - a) It does not actually interpret scripture.
 - b) The authority for the interpretation ceases to be the scripture and becomes the mind of the interpreter.
 - i) It is slanted by the interpreter's doctrinal position, the authority of the interpreter's church, and social and economic background.
 - ii) It suggests that God said one thing and meant something entirely different.
 - c) There is no way to test the conclusion of the interpreter.



2. The law of figurative language
 - a. While we strongly reject the method of interpretation known as allegorical interpretation in favour of literal interpretation, we also acknowledge that there are times when God uses figurative language in the giving prophecy in order to communicate a literal truth.
 - b. Figurative language can be employed and demonstrated by various means.
 - (1) Similes [using *like* or *as*] (Revelation 1:12-17)
 - (2) Metaphors
 - a) Revelation 1:5—"washed us...in his own blood"
 - b) Revelation 3:8—"an open door"
 - (3) Symbols
 - a) Identified in immediate context (Revelation 1:12, 16, 20; Revelation 12:9)
 - b) Identified elsewhere in the Bible (Revelation 13:1 w/ Daniel 7:1-3, 7, 23-24)
3. The law of time perspective
 - a. God views prophecy from the perspective of eternity (Isaiah 57:15).
 - b. As such, prophecy may be described in future, present, or past tense.
4. The law of condensed intervals
 - a. In prophetic passages, two events which greatly separated by time may be spoken of together without any mention of any time interval (see Luke 4:16-21 with Isaiah 61:1-3; Zechariah 9:9-10).
 - b. Sometimes prophecy only recognizes certain *mountain peaks* of prophecy which from a distance seem very close together, but from the standpoint of those in the valleys between them may seem very far apart.
5. The law of double reference
 - a. Some prophecies are partially fulfilled in history only to be completely fulfilled at a later time (see Hosea 11:1 with Matthew 2:14-15; Jeremiah 50 and 51 with Revelation 18:9-21).
 - b. This is not to suggest a failure on the part of God or an inadequacy on the part of scripture. In fact, it demonstrates God's omniscience and often unveils man's unbelief when in the immediate prophecies are only partially fulfilled.
6. The law of conditional prophecy
 - a. Prophecy is not conditional unless stated or demonstrated to be so.
 - b. If prophecy is intended to be conditional, the scripture will make that clear (Genesis 2:16-17; Deuteronomy 28:1, 15; Deuteronomy 30:15-18; Deuteronomy 31:28-29; Jonah 3:1-10; Jonah 4:1-2).
7. The law of historical progression
 - a. Each age of Bible inspiration adds more detail and depth to the basic themes of prophecy. For example, the truths unveiled in Numbers 24:14 are expanded in the books of Daniel and Revelation.
 - b. Many prophetic truths will be easier to understand as those events draw nearer (Daniel 12:8-10).