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Five Principles of Interpreting the Bible

by T. Austin-Sparks

Excerpt from Chapter 1 of "The Persistent Purpose of God" originally published by Testimony Book Ministry, 1957.

I want to speak now about some principles of Biblical interpretation. It is very important for us to be able to know how the Bible is to be interpreted, and this will be especially seen in what we have to consider later on. Unless we do understand the principles of the interpretation of the Bible, the Bible is not an open book; we may know what is in the Book as a book, but we do not understand it until we have the principles of interpretation. So I ask you to try and remember what I am going to say now and bring it over into our later study. We will consider five important principles of interpreting the Bible:

- 1. The Eternity of God;*
- 2. The Comprehensiveness of Christ;*
- 3. The Interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit;*
- 4. The Final Mention;*
- 5. The Only Real Value is the Spiritual.*

(1.) The Eternity Of God

The first principle of the interpretation of the Bible is the eternity of God. We must always remember that all time is present time with God. There is no past and future with God: all that is past and future with us has been present with God always. At any moment in what is time to us, eternity is present with God.

The architect always has the completed plan before him. If he is the designer of a ship, he has a model made of that ship before anything is done. He sees in the model the completed object, that is, exactly how the thing will appear when it is finished. If it is a great building, or even a city, it is the

same. The architect draws what we call a scale model, and he sees in that model exactly how the building, or the city, will be when it is finished. The builder works day by day according to that completed plan. Those who only see the parts cannot understand, and must not take the parts as being the whole. Sometimes when you look at the parts of a building, you cannot for the life of you understand what it is going to be. It is only as the completed thing is seen that you can understand the parts.

Now the Bible is just full of parts, but they are all the parts of something that God sees in completion. God is the Great Architect, He has the completed and perfect plan before Him before He begins any work. God's eternity is in every part. So we must realize that God has His full Mind behind everything that He does! *GOD'S FULL INTENTION GOVERNS EVERYTHING THAT HE DOES!* You must realize that God's Mind never grows - God Himself is incapable of development.

The temporary form of anything contains the eternal and full thought of God. You must realize that there are always *TWO MEANINGS* in anything that is in the Bible. There is the present meaning, that is, how that applies to the present situation; but there is also the future meaning. Everything in the Bible, while it has a present application, has a fuller meaning in the future. That is the first law of interpretation: it is the eternity of God.

(2.) The Comprehensiveness Of Christ

The second law of interpretation is the comprehensiveness of Christ. Christ is the interpretation of all the Bible, to know Christ is to understand the Bible. Men like Peter and Paul knew the Bible, but they did not understand it until they knew the Lord Jesus. We first know the Lord Jesus, and then we take Him back into the Bible, and He is the interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, we cannot really understand the Bible until we know the Lord Jesus. That results in this - that the Bible is really a Person, and not a book. The Bible is a Living Person, and not a dead letter. Because this Person is inexhaustible, He makes the Bible inexhaustible.

Now that is a more important principle than perhaps you realize. It is possible to exhaust the Bible as a book. We have known great Bible teachers who went through the Bible teaching it again and again, but at the end of their lives they were having difficulty in finding something fresh; and they were only repeating again and again things that they had said in past years. The reason for this is that they dealt with the Bible as a book. That will never happen if you know the Lord Jesus and see the Bible in Him, and Him in the Bible. I repeat that the Lord Jesus can never be exhausted. As the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord Jesus to us, the Bible is always more alive. So, we have our first two principles of interpretation: (1) The Eternity of God and (2) The Comprehensiveness of Christ.

(3.) The Interpreter Of The Bible Is The Holy Spirit

Now we come to number three: the interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit. I have said that Jesus is the interpretation of the Bible. I am saying now that the Holy Spirit is the *INTERPRETER* of the Bible. We are familiar with the words in the Letter to the Corinthians, but let us just look at them again now. The First letter to the Corinthians, chapter two and verse thirteen: "*Which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.*"

Now I do not know if you have marginal references in your Bible but the more correct translation of those words is this: "interpreting spiritual things to spiritual men." Let us read the whole passage again in that way:

Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth; interpreting spiritual things to spiritual men.

That scripture is a very important statement, and it definitely affirms the principle that we are now setting forth - the interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit. First of all then, the Bible is the Holy Spirit's Book. The Bible is not firstly man's Book, it is not our Book, we have not got the Book. We have got certain writings which are called Scripture, but in truth we do not possess the Book.

You remember the case in Acts of the Ethiopian eunuch. When Philip came near to his chariot, he heard the Ethiopian reading. He was reading the Book at Isaiah 53. Philip said to him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" and he said, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" Here is a man who had the Book in a certain sense, but in a real and profitable sense he did not possess the Book. We can have the Book as a volume, and yet we may not possess the Book, because the Bible is the Holy Spirit's Book first. The mind of man and the Mind of the Spirit are two altogether different things!

Do you know that there are many, many Christians who do not recognize that! There are many Bible teachers who do not recognize that! And this is the cause of very much confusion, and the reason for very much spiritual smallness and weakness. I think this may lie at the bottom of most of the controversy. *THE BIBLE IS A CLOSED BOOK TO ALL BUT SPIRITUAL MEN.* This is the principle that the Lord Jesus set before Nicodemus: *You must be born from above before you can see what is above.*

Our measure of understanding of the Bible will be just in accordance with the measure of our spiritual life. This is why the Lord takes us through experiences in order to bring us to understanding. The measure of our death to the natural mind will be the measure of our understanding of the things of the Spirit. Please remember that in these days which are before us - something has got to happen *IN US* before we understand the Scripture. We cannot understand the Word of God by just deciding that we are going to have a training course, that we are going to have some classes for Bible teaching. No, that is not the way in which we come to understanding of the Word of God. We shall only understand according to the measure of our spiritual life. That is the third principle of Biblical interpretation. Now we come to the fourth.

(4.) The Final Mention

The final mention of any particular matter in the Bible is usually a key to all its meaning. That is something that we must think about! We find certain things mentioned again and again in the Bible; but when we come to the final occasion where that thing is mentioned, we usually find the key to all that has been said about that matter before. If you take a particular matter, where it is mentioned for the last time, and then note the setting and the context and the relationship, you will get the full meaning of all that has been said about that before.

Now that is a statement that I have made, and you will need to think and to work on that, but I will help you by taking just one illustration. In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation twenty-two and verse two, we have the last reference to *"the tree of life."* Now when we go right back to the beginning of the Bible, we have *"the tree of life"* mentioned, but we are told nothing about it - it is just referred to as something that exists. We have no explanation, we are not told what that tree is, or what it means; it is just referred to as *"the tree of life."* We have to go to the end of the Bible for the explanation, and when we come to this last chapter of the Bible, by the context and relationship, we have a very large explanation.

Let us look at the passage. Revelation 22: *"And He showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb,"* - note the context, *'the throne of God and of the Lamb.'* you have got to read the whole book of the Revelation to understand that! There is a tremendous amount in the early chapters of this book about *"the throne of God and of the Lamb."* And you need to understand what the throne of God is and what is the significance of the throne of the Lamb - in the midst of the throne is a Lamb!

Now in relation to *"the throne of God and of the Lamb,"* there is *"a river of the water of life... in the midst of the street thereof. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve manner (kinds) of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein: and His bondservants shall serve Him."* There is *"the tree of life."* It bears immortal fruit. *THERE IS NO PLACE FOR DEATH HERE.* Its fruit is born every month: this is fruit immortal, or fruit without death. The leaves of this tree are for the *HEALTH* of the nations. I am sorry that in most versions the word "healing" is wrongly translated. I do not know what the word is in your translation, but the original is not for "the healing of the nations," but for "the health of the nations." You may ask, "What is the difference?" Well, one is *THE REMOVAL OF DISEASE* and the other is *THE PREVENTION OF DISEASE.*

In Revelation 22, we have come to the time when the spiritual diseases of the nations have been healed, but the health of the nations needs to be preserved. It is a state that is to be maintained. Thus, the leaves are not for healing, they are for preservation. And so it says: *"And there shall no longer be any curse."*

You see, you have got the whole history of the Bible in those words. You have got all that came on the nations through Adam's sin. You have corruption and death - moral disease - the result of a curse. All that is now cleared up, and *"the tree of life"* represents *VICTORY OF LIFE* over all that, *Life Triumphant*, and *Life Abundant*. Here the full meaning of *"the tree of life"* is revealed. And it is like that with all other matters. When you come to the last mention, you have the key to the whole subject. That is a principle of the interpretation of the Bible.

(5.) The Only Real Value Is The Spiritual

Now I come to the last principle for the present, number five: the only real value is the spiritual. We must remember this when we are reading and studying the Bible, and we must keep this in mind in these times in which we are together. We must not come here just with a thirst for more information or a craving for more knowledge. There are people who just want to get more and more knowledge and education. Now that constitutes a danger. That is exactly how Adam was caught. You see, Satan said: "If you take of this tree, you will know"; it was "the tree of knowledge." And there is always a danger in eating of that tree. It might just lead us into death and not into life. So, I repeat this principle of Biblical interpretation: the only real value is the spiritual. And spiritual value is just how something affects our life with God! I do wish that Adam had recognized that! When Satan tempted him to take of "the tree of knowledge," if only Adam had said, "How will this affect my life with God?" he, and we, should have been saved all the trouble.

So, let me say this again, spiritual value is just how something affects our life with God. Shall I put that in another way - spiritual value is just how much something increases the measure of Christ. If Christ is the interpretation of the Bible, then the spiritual knowledge of the Bible results in an increase of Christ. If our days together do not result in an increase of the measure of Christ, we have missed the Way. If we do not go away more Christ-like men and women, with a larger measure of the Lord Jesus, this training course has failed. So I beg of you to pray all the way through that this

time together may mean *SPIRITUAL INCREASE* and not intellectual enlargement, but *SPIRITUAL KNOWLEDGE*.

Everything has got to be judged by how much it contributes to the Ultimate Purpose of God. We have to ask, "Where does this lead us? Is it leading us anywhere? What is it leading us to?" All spiritual knowledge leads to an increase of Christ; it contributes to the ultimate purpose of God. The question always is "How much of Life is there in it?" It is not a matter of interest; it is not a matter of fascination with Bible truth; it is not a matter of making us more important people, by the enlarging of our natural stature, but *it is just a matter of the measure of Christ. That is the real spiritual value.*