

## IS THE BIBLE SUNSHINE OR FOG?

(from *Expository Studying* by Joel James)

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A number of years ago the governing board of a major evangelical seminary in the United States appointed a new seminary president. Unfortunately, many of the lecturers at that seminary no longer believed or taught the biblical truths championed by the seminary's doctrinal statement. Therefore, the president's first job was to clean house theologically; the liberal lecturers had to be weeded out.

The new president took a direct approach to his assignment. He met with every lecturer and gave him or her the option to sign the doctrinal statement in good faith or to resign. When confronted with those two alternatives, one of the lecturers replied coldly, "I can make that doctrinal statement mean anything I want." The president calmly responded, "You're fired." The lecturer retorted, "You can't fire me. I have tenure at this school, and my contract says that because of that, you can't fire me." To which the president replied, "I can make that contract mean anything I want."

That lecturer wanted communication to be unclear only when it was convenient for her. She believed that God's word and her school's doctrinal statement could be interpreted a dozen different ways, but when it came to the contract that protected her salary, she demanded an accurate, literal, grammatical, historical, objective interpretation. She refused to give God what she demanded for herself and her contract.

We cannot accept such double standards. Every day we rightly assume that accurate, understandable, one-meaning communication is possible in the human realm. It is equally possible when God speaks.

Is the Bible sunshine or fog? Light or darkness? Clear or obscure? As a preacher, can you open your Bible expecting (with some hard work) to understand what God said? Is it possible to find *God's* meaning when you study the Bible? There are at least seven reasons why you can be confident that the Bible has one clear meaning for all people everywhere, and therefore, can be interpreted and preached objectively and accurately.

### 1) THE BIBLE WAS WRITTEN TO REVEAL TRUTH, NOT TO HIDE IT

The Bible itself says that God revealed the Scripture so that men and women can read it, understand it, and obey it. David wrote, "The law of the Lord is perfect ... making wise the simple" (Ps 19:7). The Bible was written to make clear, not to confuse. In Isaiah God said, "I have not spoken in secret, in some dark land" (Isa 45:19); God spoke to be heard and understood. Just before his death, Moses assured Israel that they would not have to make a special trip to heaven or sail far across the sea to discover and obey God's commands. God's mind was publicly and understandably revealed in His law.

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the

sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it (Deut 30:11-14).

God gave the Bible to be understood and obeyed; therefore, while interpreting the Bible is a difficult task, it is not an impossible one.<sup>1</sup> His purpose for speaking was to make wise the simple, to reveal truth, not to hide it.

## 2) GOD IS BOTH CREATOR AND COMMUNICATOR

A second reason you can come to the Bible expecting to find a clear, understandable message is *God is both Creator and Communicator*.<sup>2</sup> The same God who created you also spoke the Bible. A Communicator who created the listeners to whom He speaks can speak in a way that they can understand. David wrote, "O Lord, You have searched me and known me ... [You] are intimately acquainted with all my ways" (Ps 139:1, 3). The God who knows human beings and all their ways that intimately can write a message they can understand.

## 3) INSPIRATION GUARANTEES AN ACCURATE MESSAGE

You can also expect to discover God's message when you study the Bible because *inspiration guarantees an accurate message*. The Bible is not a pond disturbed by a pebble—too full of ripples to reflect God's mind accurately. It is a mirror that reflects God's mind precisely, right down to the very words.

In 1 Corinthians 2:10-13 Paul outlines four steps of divine inspiration that guarantee the Bible's accuracy.<sup>3</sup> Before God the Father revealed His thoughts, He first thought those thoughts. And since God knows everything and never lies, His thoughts are always absolutely true. Paul said that God the Holy Spirit then searched and understood the Father's thoughts: "God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (2:10). Since He is fully God, the Holy Spirit knows the Father's infinite thoughts with infinite precision.

But how did God's thoughts come to be written? In the third step, the Spirit delivered God's thoughts to men: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God" (2:12a). This established a direct pipeline from God to Paul. The very same Spirit who searched and understood God's thoughts delivered those thoughts intact to Paul. There were no human middlemen to garble, confuse, or distort the message.

In the fourth step of inspiration, Paul spoke or wrote that God-thought, Spirit-delivered message. To make sure that Paul reflected God's mind with complete accuracy, the Holy Spirit taught Paul which words to use: "...we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those [i.e., those *words*] taught by the Spirit" (2:13a, cp. 2 Pet 1:20-21). God's revelation was given in such a way that each prophet or author of Scripture used his own vocabulary and communication style when speaking or writing. However, the words Paul and the others wrote in their original manuscripts were in every case exactly the words God wanted them to use: "We also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

What is the result of this four-step process? Sure knowledge. Paul wrote, "We have received ... the Spirit who is from God, *so that we may know* the things freely given to us by God" (2:12, emphasis added). Inspiration leads to a sure knowledge of God's message because His mind is accurately revealed in the Bible right down to the very words used.

#### 4) PROPHECY FULFILLED AS GIVEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

*Prophecy fulfilled as given in the Old Testament* also assures preachers that an objective interpretation of the Bible is possible. For example, Micah 5:2 said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. In Matthew 2:4-6, that prophecy was fulfilled *as given*. Micah 5:2 did not mean different things to different people. It didn't mean that the Messiah would be born in Bethshemesh, Bethhoron, Bethel, or Bethany. It meant that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Old Testament prophecy fulfilled as given proves that the Bible has an objective, clear meaning.

#### 5) GOD'S SPIRIT ILLUMINES BELIEVERS' MINDS

A fifth reason it is possible to interpret the Bible with a high level of accuracy and objectivity is *God's Spirit illumines believers' minds to understand the Scripture*. The apostle John said that the Holy Spirit teaches believers; He turns on the light so that false teachers will not easily deceive them (1 John 2:26-27). The Spirit's assistance does not make us infallible interpreters, but since Bible interpretation is a divinely assisted task, you can expect that a high level of accuracy and objectivity is possible.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6) GOD THINKS AND SPEAKS ANTITHETICALLY

There must be one discoverable meaning for Scripture because *God thinks and speaks antithetically*. The word *antithetical* refers to the fact that something cannot be its opposite. Antithetical thinking is the first rule of logic: *A cannot be non-A*. Is a cow a goat? Is a dog a cat? A jackal a lion? Of course not. Something cannot be its opposite—that's antithetical thinking.

That is important when interpreting the Bible: if something cannot be its opposite, then the Bible cannot mean one thing to a European and something else to an African. The Bible cannot mean two things any more than a cow can be a goat or a dog can be a cat. For example, if a verse teaches that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, it cannot also teach that salvation is by works. Both cannot be right. And that is how God thinks, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because *no lie is of the truth*" (1 John 2:21, emphasis added). In God's view of things, error is not truth.

Imagine a circle. Inside the circle is everything God says: it is all true without exception. Outside the circle is everything else, everything that disagrees with what God says. As far as God is concerned there is no traffic between the inside and the outside of that circle: lies are not truth; truths are not lies. The idea that there are many contradictory "truths" is called *pluralism*. God does not think pluralistically. God, for example, does not

think that all religions are equally valid. God thinks antithetically: Christ is the one way of salvation; all other ways lead to destruction (John 14:6; Acts 4:12).

Jay Adams writes, "People who study the Bible in depth develop antithetical mindsets: They think in terms of contrasts or opposites."<sup>6</sup> He is right. Antithetical thinking is found in virtually every paragraph of the Bible. Such opposites include truth and error, the righteous and the wicked, light and darkness, the holy and the unclean, wisdom and folly—the list is endless.

Bible interpretation must reflect God's way of thinking; after all, it's His book. A passage of Scripture cannot have one meaning to Tom, another meaning to Dick, and yet another meaning to Harry. There is not a Western meaning and an African meaning, an urban meaning and a rural meaning. While one passage will often have many applications, every Bible passage has only one meaning, the meaning God intended based on the words, grammar, and syntax He moved the human author to use. Since God thinks antithetically, a passage cannot mean both one thing and another.

## 7) GOD CAN DO WHAT WE CAN DO

We can be sure that the Bible contains an understandable message from God because *God can do what we can do*. We cannot deny God the ability to speak understandably since we ourselves daily exercise that ability. It is popular today to say that there can be no certainty in Bible interpretation because we can never be sure what anyone (including God) is saying. However, all human relationships are based on the fact that we understand each other amazingly well. In fact, daily human relationships would be impossible if the fog of communication were as impenetrable as some say it is.

Try to tell your bank manager that words have no clear meaning when he informs you that you owe the bank ten thousand US Dollars. He'll tell you to stop talking nonsense and to pay up. Business contracts, homework assignments, and phone calls to your family all assume that objective, accurate communication is normal. Misunderstandings are possible (occasionally even frequent), but if you tell your wife that you will be home next Tuesday, she expects you on Tuesday, not Thursday. No matter what people say, daily life works only because understandable communication *is* possible.

Strangely enough, some Christians believe that God is a less capable communicator than they are. They act every day on the assumption that their friends and family understand them; nevertheless, they obstinately refuse to believe that God can speak as clearly as they can.

In Psalm 50:21 God rebuked the wicked because "you thought I was just like you." Sadly, the seminary lecturer I referred to at the beginning of this chapter had not even made that mistake. Like many others today, she had placed God *below* herself. She had imagined that God was weak, fumbling, and incompetent when it came to communicating a clear message. But to say that the omniscient, omnipotent God cannot speak a clear, understandable message is an insult to God.

When you open your Bible for personal study or to prepare your sermons, you can do so convinced that God's message can be discovered. The Bible was written to reveal truth, not hide it. It is an accurate message spoken by a God who knows everything, including how to communicate effectively to His creatures. But while the Bible is a clear, understandable message from God, it still needs to be interpreted. What are the wise, trustworthy guidelines for interpreting God's message?

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Endnotes: Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand*, 38-39.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *He is There and He is Not Silent* 72.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaiser, Jr., "A Neglected Text in Bibliology Discussions: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (Spring 1981): 302-319.

<sup>4</sup> See Wayne Grudem *Systematic Theology* , 81.

<sup>5</sup> McCartney, *Let the Reader Understand*, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Adams, *A Call to Discernment*, 29.