

Sam Storms  
Bridgeway Church / Foundations  
God Revealed (4)

*How Should we Read, Interpret, and Apply God's Word?*  
**Part Four**

*How to Recognize and Avoid the Most Common Interpretive Mistakes  
and Other Miscellaneous Observations on Interpreting the Bible*

In this lesson we'll look at seven of the more common interpretive mistakes people make and suggest some guidelines to help avoid them.

(1) One of the most important principles for properly interpreting and applying God's Word is to ask the question: Where is this text (or where are these people) in the storyline of God's redemptive purposes in history? Thus when Jesus told his disciples that they were to tell no one about him (Mark 8:30) we must not wrench this out of its unique historical context and apply it universally to all Christians in all times.

(2) Are we obligated to do everything Jesus commanded? Yes and No! In Matthew 7:24 and 26 Jesus said that "everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. . . . And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand." Thus if Jesus issues a command or instruction to all his followers, regardless of their historical circumstances, we should obey it.

But we must also on occasion answer No to our question when a specific command is given to a specific group living at a specific time in history. This is likely the case with Matthew 10:8 where Jesus says: "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." Of course, we must always pray for the sick to be healed. On certain rare occasions God might raise the dead in response to our prayers. And we do have authority over demons. As someone said, these are *opportunities* for all Christians to minister to those in need. But this text does not speak of an *obligation* that falls on all Christians. Andrew Wilson has directed us to look at the surrounding context to determine how a passage such as this might or might not apply directly to us.

We see in Matthew 10:1 that Jesus is speaking specifically to "his twelve disciples" (v. 1a). He "gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal every disease and every affliction" (v. 1b). This "authority" knows no limitations. He then proceeds to name the twelve to whom this authority is given (vv. 2-4).

Other instructions given to them by Jesus are clearly restricted to the twelve at that particular time in redemptive history. In vv. 5-6 they are told, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." They are told not to take money, a change of clothes, or shoes on their journey (vv. 9-10), and so on.

Paul clearly says in 1 Corinthians 12:29-30 that not all Christians work miracles or minister in gifts of healings.

The command to "raise the dead" is given only in texts like Matthew 10:8 where the twelve apostles are specifically (and only) in view.

(3) The Bible is certainly *for* our time, but it is not always *about* our time. Or again, the Bible is for us, but not about us. The Bible was written for the people to whom it was originally addressed and not directly to us. That does not mean the Bible cannot speak to our age and our historical context.

(4) One of the more common problems we encounter is when someone quotes a passage out of context and claims they have authority to determine its meaning and application because God has "revealed" it to them. When this happens we must keep in mind what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21. There we are told that any claim to having received a "revelation" must be judged or weighed or assessed by Scripture itself.

Here is the principle: ***“No one has the right to short-circuit our responsibility to evaluate his/her claim from Scripture by insisting on a ‘revelation’ about Scripture’s meaning which others cannot evaluate by studying the Bible for themselves.”*** “Otherwise,” notes Craig Keener, “anyone could claim that Scripture means anything! Any view can be supported based on proof-texts out of context; any theology can make its reasoning sound consistent; Jehovah’s Witnesses do this all the time. We dare not base our faith on other people’s study of the Bible rather than on the Bible itself.”

(5) The danger of interpretive reductionism is one that we need to understand. This is the mistake of taking a stated purpose of some phenomenon and reducing that phenomenon solely to that one purpose. Here are two examples:

The NT teaches that signs, wonders, and miraculous gifts of the Spirit are designed to bear witness or testify to the message of salvation. Cessationists tend to conclude that if this stated purpose cannot any longer be met or fulfilled, such supernatural phenomena have ceased to exist. But they have erred by “reducing” the purpose of the supernatural to that one function, when the NT indicates such manifestations of the Spirit also serve to edify or build up believers (1 Cor. 12:7-10; among other explicit purposes).

Some argue from John 16:13-15 that since the “primary” purpose of the coming of the Spirit is to “glorify” Jesus, the “sole” purpose is to glorify Jesus. But we must not reduce the primary goal to an exclusive or solitary goal. The Spirit actually has been given to accomplish numerous other goals and often does things that draw direct attention to himself.

(6) There are a number of mistakes people make when it comes to trying to interpret particular words in the Bible. Here are a few.

(a) Keep in mind that a word does not always have the same meaning everywhere it occurs in Scripture, even within the same book. For example, consider the word *sarx*, often translated “flesh.” In Romans it means human nature (1:3), the physical body (2:28), a human being or man (3:20), the old, unregenerate self (7:5), natural birth (9:8), the sinful nature (8:13; 13:14).

Furthermore, we read in Matt. 24:12 that “no flesh will be saved” (i.e., no person); Heb. 5:7 speaks of “the days of his flesh” (his earthly life); and Jude 7 refers to angels who went after “strange flesh” (i.e., engaged in sexual immorality). Two additional senses of the term are found in 1 Cor. 1:26, where it means human standards, and in 2 Cor. 5:16, where it means from a worldly point of view. The point is this: “One can never say what *sarx* means, but only what it means in this or that context” (Louw, pp. 39-40).

(b) People also misinterpret certain words by trying to determine their meaning based on the root or form/shape or components of which it is made. Here are some common examples.

*Agapao* and *Phileo* - Observe that *agapao* and its related noun *agape* are used in 2 Sam. 13:15 (LXX) to describe Amnon’s incestuous rape of his half-sister Tamar. See also 2 Tim. 4:10 (*agapao*); and compare John 3:35 (*agapao*) with John 5:20 (*phileo*). See also the famous exchange between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17. None of this is to suggest that there isn’t a special quality to God’s love for us. Certainly his love is sacrificial and divine. But this is not because of some intrinsic meaning in the verb *agapao* or the noun *agape*.

*Monogenes* - Thought by many to be derived from *monos* (only) and *gennao* (to beget), hence “only-begotten”. But cf. Heb. 11:17. Hence, the best translation is probably something like unique, special, well-beloved son.

*Apostolos* - The fact that this word is related to the verb *apostello* (to send), is often used to argue that the root meaning of “apostle” is “one who is sent.” But as Carson points out, the “NT use of the noun [*apostolos*] does not center on the meaning ‘the one sent’ but on *messenger*. Now a messenger is usually sent; but the word ‘messenger’ also calls to mind the message the person carries, and suggests he represents the one who sent him. In other words, actual usage in the NT suggests that *apostolos* commonly bears the meaning of ‘a special representative’ or ‘a special messenger’ rather than *someone sent out*” (*Exegetical Fallacies*, p. 29).

*Ekklesia* - One often hears that since this word is built from the preposition *ek* (from or out of) and the verb *kaleo* (to call) it means "the called out ones" or some such idea. But there is no indication that this was its emphasis in NT times. It simply means "the congregation" or the "assembly."

Or consider the Greek word for "repent," *metanoieo*. The second half of the word, *noieo*, is related to thinking. Some then conclude that "repent" simply means to change one's mind. But the New Testament generally uses "repent" not in the sense of "changing one's mind" but in the sense of "turn" as in the Old Testament prophets: a radical turning of our lives from sin to God's righteousness.

Craig Keener has directed us to a contemporary example. If one of his students called him a "nice professor," they might intend it as a compliment. But if he were committed to understanding words according to their origins, he could grow very angry. In English, "nice" is a friendly term; but its Latin source means "ignorant" or "foolish." So he could misunderstand someone calling him "nice" as that person calling him "ignorant"! We know that English does not work that way, and we should not expect ancient languages to work that way, either.

All that being said, there are some instances where the meaning of a word is more directly related to its root. Take *ekballo* for example, the word commonly used to refer deliverance from an indwelling demonic presence. It is made up of "ek" (out of, from) and "ballo" (to cast, throw), hence to cast out, throw out.

(c) Another mistake people make is what is known as semantic anachronism. This is when a late use of a word is read back into earlier literature. An example is the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we derive our English term "dynamite." Semantic anachronism would be interpreting the meaning of the first century Greek word by an appeal to the meaning of the twenty-first century English word. The "power" or *dunamis* of the gospel (Rom. 1:16) is not that it explodes or blows up or destroys something/someone, but that it is effective in overcoming human sin and resistance to the gospel by transforming the heart and persuading the mind.

A classic case of semantic anachronism is 2 Corinthians 9:7 where Paul says: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a *cheerful* giver." The word "cheerful" is the translation of the Greek term *hilaros*, from which ultimately came the English word "hilarious". But that doesn't mean that what Paul meant in this text is that people should giggle and laugh uncontrollably when they give. "Hilarious" may mean that today, but that doesn't necessarily suggest that *hilaros* meant that in the first century.

(d) People also make false assumptions about the supposed technical meaning. Here the interpreter falsely assumes that a word always or nearly always has a certain technical or theologically immutable meaning. Some examples include: 1) "sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3 and 1 Cor. 1:2); 2) "revelation" (Phil. 3:15); 3) "call" or "calling" (in Paul and in the synoptic gospels); 4) "justify" (in Paul and in James); 5) "mystery" (in Col. 1:26-27 and in Eph. 3:4-6); and 6) "foundation" (in 1 Cor. 3:11 and in Eph. 2:20).

(7) Letting the Bible interpret the Bible. One of the most important principles for interpreting the Bible is the truth that the Bible itself is its own best interpreter. Here are two examples, both taken from the Olivet Discourse of Jesus in Matthew 24 (see also Mark 13). Most Christians believe the Olivet Discourse is a prophecy of the events that will occur immediately before the Second Coming of Jesus at the close of history. Others believe that the primary reference in the Discourse is to the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 a.d.

One argument often made to defend the end-times interpretation of the Discourse is Matthew 24:14. There Jesus predicts *widespread preaching of the gospel*.

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

This is perhaps the single most oft-cited passage in defense of the interpretation that Jesus is describing the end of human history. After all, how could this possibly have occurred in the period 33-70 a.d.?

Now, note two important facts. First, the words "whole world" (ESV and NASB) are a translation of the term *oikoumene*, which typically means an inhabited area, a standard term at that time for the Greek world, then for the Roman empire, and subsequently for the *then known world*. Again, I encourage you *not* to read a statement like this in view of our *global* perspective of the twenty-first century, but in light of the much more limited point of view of the people living in the first century a.d. When we do that we discover that in Jesus' day this word "meant primarily the area surrounding the Mediterranean and the lesser known areas to the east, around which stretched mysterious regions (comprising much of our 'old world') beyond the fringes of civilization" (R. T. France, 909).

The same Greek word is used in Luke 2:1 – "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world (*oikoumene*) should be registered." In Acts 11:28 we read that "one of them named Agabus stood up and foretold by the Spirit that there would be a great famine over all the *world* (this took place in the days of Claudius)". Again, in Acts 24:5, "For we have found this man [Paul] a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the *world*, and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." Often our immediate, knee-jerk interpretation is that the events described with these words describe global events. Yet we know that they were limited to the Roman empire of the first century. The reference to the "nations" also indicates that the point is not that every geographical area on the globe must be covered but that all the *Gentiles* must be reached. Did this occur as Jesus prophesied? Let's allow the biblical text to answer that question.

Writing before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d., Paul says to the Colossians: "Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed *in the whole world* it is bearing fruit and growing – as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth" (1:5b-6; emphasis mine; cf. Col. 1:23b). Similarly, in his letter to the Romans Paul writes: "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in *all the world*" (Rom. 1:8; emphasis mine). Again, in Romans 10:18, Paul says in regard to gospel proclamation that "Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to *the ends of the world* [*oikoumenes*; emphasis mine]." Furthermore, in both Colossians 1:6a and Romans 1:8, the word "world" is a translation of the Greek *kosmos*, a term that is broader and far more encompassing than merely the "inhabited earth" (*oikoumene*). Thus, if Paul can confidently say that in his day the gospel is bearing fruit and the faith of the Roman believers is proclaimed in all (or the whole) *kosmos* ("world"), we should not struggle in the least to embrace our Lord's prediction that the gospel of the kingdom, within the same general time frame, would be proclaimed to the Gentiles throughout the *oikoumene* ("inhabited earth"). The point here is simply that what appears to be "universal" or "global" language to our ears today had a much more restricted meaning in the first century.

As far as Jesus' prophecy in Matthew 24:14 is concerned, his point is that following his resurrection the gospel will be preached outside the boundaries of Judea, such that the Gentile nations in the inhabited world known as the Roman Empire will hear the testimony of his redemptive work. Only thereafter, says Jesus, will the "end" of the city and temple occur.

A second example of where we must listen to Scripture to properly interpret Scripture is Matthew 24:29-31.

"Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (24:29-31).

Is it possible that vv. 29-31 are not a literal description of the second coming but a symbolic description of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, in the colorful language of OT prophecy. The "coming" of Jesus is not to the earth at the end of history, but to the Father, in heaven, for vindication and enthronement.

What I will argue is that vv. 29-31 do not refer at all to the second coming of Christ at the end of the age but rather to events associated with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 a.d.

As noted, when one reads Matthew 24:29-31 (in particular v. 29), he/she may at first glance have difficulty seeing in it a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. This is due, in part, to the fact that Matthew's language is compressed. It is also because his language sounds like what most people believe will occur at the second coming. Phenomenal

events involving sun, moon, stars, and the powers of heaven don't sound to the 21<sup>st</sup> century mind like a description of what happened in 70 a.d. The reason for that is because we mistakenly seek to interpret and understand prophecy by reading the New York Times, the Drudge Report, or Time magazine, or by watching the evening news on TV rather than by reading the Bible. Remember, *Jesus was speaking to a people saturated by Old Testament language, concepts, and imagery. From the earliest days of their lives they memorized and were taught the OT. Thus, when Jesus spoke to them of things to come he used the prophetic vocabulary of the OT which they would instantly recognize.* Consequently, if we are to understand the meaning of Matthew 24:29-31 and its parallel in Mark 13:24-27 and Luke 21:25-26, we must read and interpret them through a *biblical* (i.e., OT) lens.

Luke refers to "signs" in sun, moon, and stars. Matthew says "the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven." Are these literal, physical, astronomical events that one might see with the naked eye? I don't think so.

In the OT, *such language was used to portray not what is going on in the heavens but what is happening on the earth.* Natural disasters, political upheaval, and turmoil among the nations are often described figuratively through the terminology of cosmic disturbances. The ongoing and unsettled, turbulent state of affairs among *earthly* world powers is portrayed symbolically by reference to incredible events in the *heavens*. In other words, astronomical phenomena are used to describe the upheaval of earthly dynasties as well as great moral and spiritual changes. Once we learn to read this language in the light of the OT we discover that great upheavals upon earth are often represented with the imagery of commotions and changes in the heavens. As we shall see, when the sun and moon are darkened or the stars fall from heaven, the reference is to the disasters and distresses befalling nations on the earth.

In Isaiah 13:9-10 we read of the impending judgment of God on Babylon, which he describes in this way:

“For the stars of the heavens and their constellations will not give their light; the sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light” (v. 10).

Clearly, these statements about celestial bodies no longer providing light is figurative for the convulsive transformation of political affairs in the Ancient Near East, on earth. *The destruction of earthly kingdoms is portrayed in terms of a heavenly shaking.*

We find much the same thing in Ezekiel as he describes the impending destruction of Egypt:

“When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light. All the bright lights of heaven will I make dark over you, and put darkness on your land, declares the Lord GOD. . . . When I make the land of Egypt desolate, and when the land is desolate of all that fills it, when I strike down all who dwell in it, then they will know that I am the LORD” (Ezek. 32:7-9,15).

The destruction of Idumea (Edom) is described in this way:

“All the host of heaven shall rot away, and the skies roll up like a scroll. All their host shall fall, as leaves fall from the vine, like leaves falling from the fig tree. For my sword has drunk its fill in the heavens; behold, it descends for judgment upon Edom, upon the people I have devoted to destruction” (Isa. 34:4-5).

Thus, as William Kimball points out, "when Israel was judged, or when Babylon was subdued by the Medes, or when Idumea and Egypt were destroyed, it was not the literal sun, moon, and stars that were darkened. The literal stars of heaven did not fall from the skies, and the literal constellations were not dissolved or rolled up as a scroll. These figurative expressions were clearly presented in a purely symbolic manner to characterize the destruction befalling nations and earthly powers” (The Great Tribulation, 166).

Language that describes the collapse of cosmic bodies, therefore, was often used by “OT prophets to symbolize God’s acts of judgment within history, with the emphasis on catastrophic political reversals” (France, 922). Therefore, France concludes that “if such language was appropriate to describe the end of Babylon or Edom under the judgment of God,

why should it not equally describe God's judgment on Jerusalem's temple and the power structure which it symbolized?" (Ibid.)

In summary, "it is crass literalism," notes N. T. Wright, "in view of the many prophetic passages in which this language denotes socio-political and military catastrophe, to insist that this time the words must refer to the physical collapse of the space-time world. This is simply the way regular Jewish imagery is able to refer to major socio-political events and bring out their full significance" (Victory, 361). Again, "the dramatic and (to us) bizarre language of much 'apocalyptic' writing is evidence, not of paranoia or a dualistic worldview, as is sometimes anachronistically suggested, but of a creative reuse of Israel's scriptural, and particularly prophetic, heritage" (513). It seems only "natural" to conclude that Matthew 24:29 is stock-in-trade OT prophetic language for *national disaster*. Our Lord, therefore, is not prophesying that bizarre astronomical events will occur; he is predicting that the judgment of God will soon fall decisively on the Jewish nation.

### Discussion Questions

The discussion for this lesson will focus on two points made earlier in the notes.

(1) The Bible is certainly *for* our time, but it is not always *about* our time. Or again, the Bible is for us, but not about us. The Bible was written for the people to whom it was originally addressed and not directly to us. That does not mean the Bible cannot speak to our age and our historical context.

What do you make of this? Does it make sense? How might it affect the way you interpret and then apply certain biblical texts?

(2) One of the more common problems we encounter is when someone quotes a passage out of context and claims they have authority to determine its meaning and application because God has "revealed" it to them. When this happens we must keep in mind what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:29 and 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21. There we are told that any claim to having received a "revelation" must be judged or weighed or assessed by Scripture itself.

Here is the principle: "***No one has the right to short-circuit our responsibility to evaluate his/her claim from Scripture by insisting on a 'revelation' about Scripture's meaning which others cannot evaluate by studying the Bible for themselves.***" "Otherwise," notes Craig Keener, "anyone could claim that Scripture means anything! Any view can be supported based on proof-texts out of context; any theology can make its reasoning sound consistent; Jehovah's Witnesses do this all the time. We dare not base our faith on other people's study of the Bible rather than on the Bible itself."

This is a major problem especially among charismatic Christians. It raises the question of what role the Holy Spirit has in helping us interpret Scripture. What is that role? What do you think the Spirit does? What do you think the Spirit will not do?