

Vital Rules for Understanding Biblical Prophecy

You can understand Bible prophecy! Jesus taught with clarity and with the full expectation that His followers would understand His meaning. Scripture alone makes us complete, capable and proficient in understanding. Here are a few simple things to keep in mind.

Unless a Scripture text clearly indicates it is symbolic or figurative, it should be taken literally.

Author Dr. Ron Rhodes has a reliable saying: “When plain sense makes good sense, seek no other sense, lest you end up in nonsense.” Start with the plain sense and go no further if the meaning seems clear. Otherwise, you’ll end up interpreting everything in the Bible according to your imagination and perspective.

When you encounter a symbol or allegory in the Bible, you will find clues to its meaning elsewhere in Scripture. Let Scripture interpret Scripture. Even in the book of Revelation, the symbols are many times explained later in John’s writings.

For example, a person could ask, “What are the golden candlesticks John writes about in Revelation?” All you have to do is read a little farther to find out he’s talking about the churches.

When we get tricky by assigning arbitrary meanings, we behave as those Peter wrote about: “Some things are hard to understand, which the unlearned and unstable distort, as they also do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16b).

When you take literal language and turn it into figurative speech, you’re at the mercy of whomever decides what it means.

When we take the Bible literally, we don't ignore that there is allegory in the Bible and there is figurative speech in the Bible, but we affirm that figurative speech in the Bible is always meant to illustrate an important spiritual truth or principle, and we will always know when it's an allegory or a parable.

Jesus consistently interpreted the Old Testament literally and affirmed its divine inspiration. If the literal interpretation of Scripture is good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for us when studying end-times prophecy and everything else in His precious Word.

Pay attention to context.

Is the text speaking to Israel or the Jewish people? Is it speaking to a certain nation or leader? Is it speaking to Christians? Who is the audience? God typically deals with three different groups in prophecy: Israel, the church and unbelievers.

The Old Testament was written originally by, to and for Jews. The words and idioms were intelligible to them, just as Jesus' words were when He lived on earth. We should have some awareness of the life and times in which Scripture was written. Spiritual principles will be timeless but often can't be properly appreciated without some knowledge of the background.

Also, context matters. As you read, ask: "What is the context of this passage?" Isolated verses can be used to mean anything, as we've seen demonstrated by a hodgepodge of faulty modern prophets. Instead, ask, "What does it say before the verse? What does it say after the verse?"

Remember: Jesus Christ fulfilled literally all the prophecies concerning His first coming. So he will fulfill literally all the prophecies concerning his second coming.

Most importantly, remember the purpose of prophecy.

“Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy” (Rev. 19:10b). Cult-like and twisted interpretations of Scripture present another Jesus and another gospel, leading to error and ensuing judgment (2 Cor. 11:3-4; Gal. 1:6-9; Rev. 20:11-15). The point of prophecy is that we would worship God and understand the testimony of Christ.

Further Suggestions

Here are a few more foundational guidelines that will help you gain a clearer understanding when reading biblical prophecy:

As you read, ask, “What does the word mean?” This may require some research that goes farther than looking up the word in a dictionary. You may want to get *Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* or a good Greek and Hebrew lexicon.

As you read, pray, “Father, I ask that Your Spirit will enlighten and guide me in my study” (John 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:9-11). The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth who guides us into all truth (John 16:13). We can only understand God’s Word with His enlightenment through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:18). The Holy Spirit will guide you into all truth in a way that is consistent with His nature, His Word and His purposes. {eoa}

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