

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

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DAY SEVEN – INTERPRETING PARABLES & PROPHECY

In this article on studying the Bible we will look at two kinds of literature that make their own special contribution to our spiritual diet. They aren't essential to basic health, but add variety and enjoyment to Bible study. When used in their proper place they make a fine contribution to a menu. They are spices (parables) and desert (prophecy).

Parable Principles

Parables can be thought of as spices because both parables and spices are used to bring out the main flavor of what's accompanying it. Parables bring out and illustrate a spiritual truth. Spices (salt, pepper, sage, ginger, oregano, cinnamon, etc.) do the same thing to food. Abuse or trying to get derive too much out of them will do more harm than good, but they are neither any good by themselves. You could never live on a diet of just spices, but when used correctly they are great! A parable is a short story used to illustrate a truth, like the story or illustrations your pastor uses in his sermons (I hope!). Aesop used them, so did Jesus. There are many in the Old Testament, too, although not as common as easy to pick out.

Many of the skills you have been developing through this “How to Study the Bible” series are used in interpreting parables. Your history questions (Who, When, Where, What, How and Why) must be answered correctly. Also customs and practices of how people lived in the time and place the parable is about is of the utmost importance.

Use these parable principles when you interpret parables. Keep in mind the purpose of parables: 1) to reveal truth to believers and 2) to hide truth from unbelievers (Matthew 13:10-17). Look for the main idea of the parable. Interpret all subordinate details in light of the main idea for parables only teach one main spiritual truth. Remember that not all details have a spiritual meaning so don't try to force more than the main idea into a parable. The context is the best interpreter of parables. What was the occasion, the audience, the effect of it? Always keep in mind that parables illustrate doctrine, they do not establish it. Parables are only stories used to communicate one main truth, not various hidden truths, exactly the same way you may give examples to clarify a point you're trying to make.

Prophecy Principles

Prophecy can be thought of as being dessert. It is like pie, cake, cookies, etc. These are really part of other food groups, just as is prophecy (it is part of teaching). However, desserts have a special role in how they are used. Dessert is served last, and prophecy is the study of last things. They both give you something to look forward to. Again, neither are good as a steady diet of only them. Overuse undermines health. They are meant to supplement other, more basic food items. Dessert, like prophecy, is served in a special time and way, and thus there are some special principles that apply to eating it, too.

Besides the portions of the Bible we consider prophecy (Revelation, Daniel, Ezekiel, Matthew 24-25, etc...) we must keep in mind that much of what the Old Testament prophets said was prophetic when it was said. Previous skills also apply to the study of prophecy: questions (Who, When, Where, What, How, Why), word studies, topical studies, figures of speech, structural relationships (comparison, contrast, etc.), and finding the main idea all apply. Here cross-references can be helpful if you are sure they are talking about the exact same event. With prophecy it is always helpful to draw a chart or outline of the passage. This could even be a picture you draw.

Here, too, there are prophecy principles to help you in your study. Interpret prophecy literally, taking the words in their usual/normal sense. The same rules of grammar and language apply here, so use them. Don't make interpreting prophecy harder than it is. Interpret it in harmony with other prophecy since it obviously must fit in with the rest of the Bible. Often one prophecy will refer to similar events (for example

Old Testament prophets often talk about Jesus' first and second coming interchangeably). The purpose of prophecy is to focus on Christ and give Him the glory. As you work in the power of the Spirit, He will glorify Christ through it all.

Symbols can be more difficult. Again, let the Bible interpret itself. Just use your common sense. When interpreting a symbol, look for the main characteristic the writer would have seen in it. Symbols are used the same way when used at different places in the Bible. If you aren't sure of a meaning, don't push. Just make sure your interpretation agrees with the rest of the Bible.

In your Spiritual Journal:

- **Prophecy:** Read Psalm 41:9. Here, unbeknownst to the author, Jesus betrayal is predicted thousands of years ahead of time. Study this passage with the skills you've been developing through our previous lessons in this series. (Note: John 13:18 gives an explanation of this verse. John 18:1-9 describes the event as it unfolds in the life of Jesus.)
- **Parables:** Read 2 Samuel 12:1-10. Here the prophet Nathan comes to King David after his sin with Bathsheba and gives both a parable and a prophecy. What's the main idea of Nathan's story and how can this apply to your life? How does the prophetic message make your application more precise?
- Always remember to pray before starting!