

God's Plan of the Ages

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to develop our understanding of the ways in which God works and has worked throughout time. This is vital to any understanding of how God will work in the future. We cannot *“correctly handle the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15) unless we have a biblically based understanding of God’s sovereignty in His plans for the world and His relationships with the peoples of the world. We need, therefore, to study the scriptures so that we can achieve the challenge Paul set Timothy, *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15).

We need to consider.

- The key principles of interpretation of scripture.
- Bible based descriptions of periods of time.
- The place of the nations in the plan of God.
- The place of Israel in the plan of God.
- The place of the Church in the plan of God.
- The principles that God uses in his dealings with the world.
- The relationships and the basis of those relationships that God has with individuals and nations.

Key Principles of Interpretation

Literal Understanding

When Jesus was born, Herod asked *“all people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, where the Christ was to be born.”* They had no doubt. *“In Bethlehem in Judea,”* they replied, *“for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel”* (Matthew 2:5/6). Herod, the Jewish leaders and the gospel writer all understood that the message, first recorded in Micah 5:2, was literal.

In the New Testament there is an emphasis on the literal fulfilment of scripture. The term “it is written” is used sixty-nine times in the New Testament. Twenty-seven of these are in the gospels.

In Matthew 11, John, who was in prison, sent to Jesus and asked, *“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* Our Lord answered, *“Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind*

receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." We need to ask why our Lord responded in such a way. What did He mean by the comments He made?

On three occasions the prophet Isaiah spoke of the healing power of Messiah. Jesus expected John to use his knowledge of scripture. In other words he said, "Look at what I am actually doing and compare that with the teaching of Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecies are being literally fulfilled before your eyes."

"In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see" (Isaiah 29:18).

"Say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you." Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy? Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert" (Isaiah 35:4 –6).

"I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness" (Isaiah 42:6/7).

The **literal fulfilment of scripture** was the Lord's encouragement for John when he was in the prison cell.

What do the words mean?

Our understanding of the literal meaning of scripture depends on us understanding the meaning of the words used in the original writings that form the New Testament. Words are the medium through which thoughts are communicated. This means that we need a clear understanding of what the words meant, at the time they were written. This problem is made difficult as the bibles, which we have, are translations. It is never easy to give the exact meaning of a word when translate from one language into another.

We need to honestly use the following principles.

1. We need to discover how the writer or his contemporaries normally use the word in a particular situation or context.
2. A word should always be given its normal, agreed meaning unless there are compelling contextual reasons to give it another meaning.
3. When a word has several meanings, then it's meaning in any given passage must be determined by context. Such an interpretation must be consistent with the author's known character, sentiments and the situation in which he wrote.
4. The simplest sense of any passage is the one most likely to be genuine.

5. It must be recognised that conventions such as the use of brackets, which mark a parenthesis, are a development made later than the time of the original writings. Therefore care must be exercised in determining where they exist. That they do occur is without doubt but no parenthesis should be accepted without sufficient reason.

The Place of History in Literal interpretation

There are two key issues when considering the place of history in our understanding of any passage of scripture.

1. The Word of God had its origin in a point or points of time in history. Therefore to understand what the writer is saying we need to understand the world of his day and the incidents that are referred to. When our Lord, for example says, *“As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man”* (Luke 24:37), he qualified the statement by giving an historical explanation. *“For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man”* (Luke 24:38/39).
2. We must be careful not to use 21st Century concepts when interpreting events or writings that are two thousand years or more old. We need to ask what did the writer mean. This is particularly true when considering words like adoption, schoolmaster, teacher, the law etc.

Time

Our Lord demonstrated that there is an issue with time in interpretation. In Luke 4 we have an account of the service that he gave in the synagogue in Nazareth. He read from Isaiah 61 and then said, *“today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* When we examine Isaiah 61 we observe that the Lord did not read the whole passage. The Lord omitted the statement concerning the *“day of vengeance of our God”*. It is part of the prophecy in Isaiah but was not being fulfilled as the Lord spoke. Its fulfilment was and in many respects still is future. From our Lord’s handling of this passage it is clear that incidents and prophecies, which appear together, may not belong to the same time. This explains the problem often encountered by the Jews who could not comprehend both a suffering and glorified Messiah.

It is important to remember that Prophetic utterances may appear contradictory e.g. a glorified Messiah and a suffering Messiah - Isaiah 52:13 speaks of an exalted and glorified Messiah while 52:14 speaks of the depths of suffering. This is because events that take place at very different times are recorded together.

As we study prophecy there are a number of key concepts in relation to time that we have to understand.

1. The prophets often speak of things that belong to the future in the present tense.

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this” (Isaiah 9:6/7).

The revelation given to the prophet was made to appear to him as either immediately present, or complete while in fact it belonged to a time in the future. E.g. John quotes *“They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing”* (Psalm 22:18). This is in the immediate present but was not fulfilled for almost a 1000 years as John confirms. This happened that the scripture might be fulfilled which said, *“They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” So this is what the soldiers did* (John 19:24).

2. They speak of things future as past.

“He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7- 9).

3. They saw the future in terms of space rather than time. Therefore they often group events rather than give them an order according to time.

“The Sovereign LORD has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me? Let us face each other! Who is my accuser? Let him confront me! It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me. Who is he who will condemn me? They will all wear out like a garment; the moths will eat them up” (Isaiah 50: 5 –9).

4. Prophecy may be fulfilled close to the date of its utterance or may be fulfilled a long while into the future. E.g. Micah 5:2, (710 BC) was fulfilled in Matthew 2. The prophecy concerning the decree for rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem was given in 538 BC and the decree followed in 445BC (Daniel 9:25 and Nehemiah 2:6)

Context

Our Lord was careful to quote scripture in context. When he refuted the attacks of Satan in Matthew 4 he quoted from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. These quotes were consistent with the context. Satan responded by quoting from Psalm 90. He quoted out of context, and the statement he made was not the will of God. When we consider any passage of scripture we must:

1. Carefully consider the preceding and subsequent sections of scripture.
2. Carefully consider the teaching of the passage and the significance of any verse, word etc. within the argument being made.
3. No explanation should be accepted that is not consistent with the context.

Signs and Symbols

Our Lord used figurative language on a number of occasions and in a number of ways during his earthly ministry. In John 3:14, He used an example from the history of the children of Israel. *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”* He also applied the experience of belief that the people in the wilderness had with those who listened to Him and compared their experiences. *“That everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”* The Lord used a symbol that was clearly understood by his listeners to explain the truth of God. We need knowledge from the Old Testament, from Numbers 21:4-9 to understand the significance of the message today.

In Matthew 12:40 he used another well known incident from history to deepen his hearers understanding. *“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”*

In John 2 the Lord spoke of the destruction of the temple. What he said could only be understood in light of the explanation given by John. *Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken”* (John 2:19-22).

The Lord also used stories that had meaning. He told of the vineyard owner who sent his servants and his son to gather fruit. He told of their suffering and the death of the son. The Lord used this to demonstrate that what Israel were about to do to Him was a prophetic fulfilment. He showed to that those who acted in such a way had responsibility for their actions. Jesus said to them, *“Have you never read in the Scriptures: the stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvellous in our eye. Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit”* (Matthew 21:42/43).

Overview of Methods of Prophetic Revelation

1. A literal revelation as to what is going to happen at a point or points of time in the future.
2. Revelations through types. A type is a spiritual application of a biblical figure. The serpent on the pole (Numbers 21:4 – 9) is used by Christ as type in John 3:14. The only certain authority we have for the use of a type is scripture itself. For a type to have any value it must conform to what the bible teaches in its literal sense.
3. Revelations through symbols. It is clear that some prophecy is revealed through the use of symbolic language. *“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches”* (Revelation 1:19/20). In this case, the symbols are explained in their immediate context.

This is a general principle. Where such explanations are not immediately available they will be explained elsewhere in scripture. There is no room for “the imaginations of man to devise explanations” (Terry). Pentecost quotes Girdlestone, “ taking the Apocalypse as a whole, there is hardly a figure or vision in it not contained in germ in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel or Zechariah. Probably the study of these books in his old age prepared the seer (John) for the visions which had to do with the near or the far future.” The student needs to search the scripture carefully to accurately expound symbolic portions. In this context a symbol is never used to explain a symbol.

4. Revelations through parables. The Lord gives the key to understanding the interpretation of parables. *“Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? The farmer sows the word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop, thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown”* (Mark 4: 13 – 20).

The Lord taught that we should:

- a. Understand the exact nature of the incident recounted in the parable.
 - b. Be clear as to the central truth being explained.
 - c. Pay careful attention to the biblical explanation and not add what is clearly not there.
 - d. Understand that parables were used by the Lord to explain truth not to reveal new truth.
 - e. Understand that teaching gained from parables is always consistent with the literal revelation of divine truth.
 - f. Appreciate that parables must not be made the first or sole source of divine truth.
5. Prophecy through dreams. In early periods of prophetic revelations, prophecy was made known through dreams. *“Then the LORD came down in a pillar of cloud; he stood at the entrance to the Tent and summoned Aaron and Miriam. When both of them stepped forward, he said, “Listen to my words: When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”* (Numbers 12: 5 – 8).

The dream is noticeably prominent in the earlier divine revelations (see Genesis 20: 3-7, 28:12, etc.).