

Special Section: Understanding Scripture

How To Profit From Prophecy . . . And Other Types Of Bible Literature

By Clinton E. Arnold

Many Christians would describe the Bible as a God-given guidebook for life. Yet people who pick it up for the first time find it quite different from the guidebooks and manuals they are familiar with. The Bible doesn't provide an indexed list of instructions dealing step-by-step with the issues of life, like, "This is what you should do if . . .," or, "Here are eight criteria for finding a good church . . .," or, "If you have come to Christ from a background in secular humanism, this is where your worldview now needs to change."

Rather, when we thumb through the pages of the Bible, we find many different kinds of writings. There are numerous stories, the lyrics of dozens of songs, as well as wise sayings, personal letters, and the records of prophecies.

What kind of a guidebook, then, is this? A brilliantly conceived one! For through the various kinds of literary styles in the Bible, God has given us not only instruction, but also the story of His grand plan, inspirational examples of the faith and failure of His people through the years, songs that help us express our deepest hurts and longings to God, and much practical insight about living day to day with one's life oriented around God and His purposes.

Because there are a variety of literary styles in the Bible, we need to consider how to read each type so that we can better grasp God's word for our own situation.

Narrative

The most common literary type in the Bible is narrative. A narrative is a story, an account of something that happened in the past. Most of the Old Testament consists of narrative, as seen in books like Genesis, Joshua, and 1 Samuel. In the New Testament, the gospels and Acts are narrative texts.

In contrast to childhood stories such as *The Wizard of Oz* or *Moby Dick*, biblical stories, or narratives, are rooted in authentic history and are vitally important for conveying truth about God and His purposes. We can be certain that when the Bible speaks of specific people, they had a real existence in time and place.

It is important, though, not to reduce the biblical narratives to mere history. They reveal God to us. The individual narratives combine to convey the story of God at work among His people—creating them, delivering them, teaching them, warning them, fighting for them, and showering them with His love and mercy. Ultimately, we could say that the biblical narratives tell us the story of redemption. They relate how a loving God saved His people from their awful plight. And Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of this plan.

Each of the individual narratives communicates still more to us. They teach us a variety of lessons about God and life. Yet in looking for these lessons we need to be careful not to read

into them morals they were not intended to convey. The following guidelines should help us discover truths in narrative texts:

1. Read the whole story at least three times. A basic familiarity with the story and all of its details is crucial to interpreting correctly. In the first reading, strive to obtain a general appreciation for the story. In subsequent readings, focus on discerning some of the crucial elements of the story as outlined below.

Some biblical books, such as Genesis, are made up of a number of individual narratives. It is ideal to read the specific passage in light of the entire book.

2. Identify the plot and the principal characters. In reading any story, we naturally identify the characters and try to understand the plot. After the characters are introduced, the conflict emerges, followed by a resolution. The story of Joseph (Genesis 37–50) provides a good example of this pattern.

3. Learn about the historical setting. Since each of the biblical narratives took place in history, knowing the setting and circumstances of the narrative helps us better understand the story. Let's say you are reading Luke's account of Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Acts 19). To gain a greater appreciation for the story, you will want to learn something about the city of Ephesus, the worship of the goddess Artemis, and the nature of the occultic arts in the ancient world. Bible encyclopedias and good commentaries are indispensable for this part of the task.

4. Find the moral or other lessons the story teaches. Each biblical writer purposefully selected certain episodes to narrate. That purpose often relates to conveying truth about God, His plan of redemption, and how we are to live in relationship to Him. As readers of the inspired text, we must discern what the author's purpose was. What is the lesson to be learned?

In John's account of the feeding of the 5,000 people (John 6:1–15), he ends the narrative by referring to this spectacular event as a "miraculous sign that Jesus did." This story therefore functions as one more indicator to the readers that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God (see John 20:31). John points out that the crowds drew their own conclusion about the nature of Jesus' Messiahship which differs markedly from what Jesus Himself was teaching (John 20:15).

The narrative may also impart additional truth about God and His purposes. In drawing this out, we need to be careful not to "over-interpret" the passage. For example, it is doubtful that there is anything particularly significant in the fact that Jesus used fish and bread when He fed the 5,000, or in the number of fish and loaves (two and five), or even in the fact that it was a small boy who originally provided the food that Jesus multiplied. We can infer, however, that Jesus is concerned with our physical well-being and can miraculously provide for us. Even more significant is Jesus' declaration of Himself as "the bread of life" (John 6:35) who "comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (John 6:33). Because of this, we need to put a much higher priority on obtaining "food that endures to eternal life" (John 6:27). The larger context can therefore provide important clues for interpreting both the meaning and relevance.

5. Research what the rest of Scripture teaches about the lessons you derived. Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart says that, "although the Old Testament narratives do not necessarily teach directly, they often illustrate what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere." To check your interpretation, determine whether it finds support elsewhere in Scripture.

6. Think about how the story contributes to the story of the book. As we interpret each of the individual biblical narratives, we should always ask ourselves how they contribute to the overall purpose of the book. The book itself may provide a number of clues that will help us interpret the significance of various parts of the respective narratives. This is particularly apparent, for example, in John's use of the word sign in his gospel.

Poetry

The book of Psalms is the most well-known collection of poetry in the Bible. Some poetic texts can be found even in narrative portions of the Bible, such as the “Song of Moses” (Exodus 15:1–18) and the “Song of Deborah” (Judges 5). Even in the New Testament we can find poetic pieces within narratives and the letters of Paul, such as Mary’s song to the Lord in Luke 1:46–55 and the poem of praise magnifying the Lord Jesus Christ in Col. 1:15–20.

To interpret poetry, we must first recognize the vital role of human emotion. The book of Psalms reveals how God’s people responded to Him as they faced both threatening and joyous situations. The book consists of cries to God for help or vindication, jubilant prayers of thanksgiving to God, expressions of mourning to God over great loss, and compositions designed to lead the gathered people of God in worship.

All of these are words spoken to God by His people. This does not mean that they are any less the inspired word of God. On the contrary, they are Spirit-inspired compositions preserved to help us express ourselves to God in the variety of life experiences we all face.

As we interpret individual passages of poetry, the following principles will help to enrich our understanding:

1. Determine what type of poem it is. The 150 psalms—like other biblical poetry—represent a wide variety of poetic styles. While we normally interpret an individual passage in light of the flow of thought in a given book, we interpret the psalms individually, apart from their context. More important, we need to discern the occasion for the composition of each psalm and its specific use. This will be closely linked to the type of poem it represents.

Here are a few examples of these occasions. Consult a good commentary or Bible handbook for additional help and a complete listing of the various types of psalms.

- *Prayers for deliverance.* This is the most common kind of prayer in the book of Psalms. See Psalm 22, which includes the cry, “O my Strength, come quickly to help me” (Psalm 22:19).
- *Songs of thanksgiving.* These songs give expression to the gratefulness of God’s people for His help and deliverance. David begins his song of praise to God with the words, “I will exalt you, O LORD, for you lifted me out of the depths” (Psalm 30:1).
- *Hymns of praise.* These are songs of praise to our awesome God for who He is and what He has done (for example, Psalms 8; Psalm 19; Psalm 66).
- *Poems expressing grief.* Numerous psalms disclose the deep sense of pain and suffering experienced by God’s people at times of death, loss, or serious struggle (see Psalms 39; Psalm 42; Psalm 44).
- *Calls to God for action against evil.* Portions of some psalms (usually the prayers for deliverance and the poems expressing grief) record the extreme emotion of the people of God against perpetrators of evil. The language of these psalms is often exaggerated. It is vitally important to realize that these words are expressed to God with the clear conviction that He is the one who avenges evil.

2. Interpret the imagery. In contrast to the relatively straightforward descriptive language of prose, poetry employs far more metaphors (figurative language) and similes (comparisons). For instance, the word “like”—commonly used to introduce a simile—occurs 178 times in the Psalms and only 26 times in Genesis.

The idea of security and productivity in life is compared to “a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season” (Psalm 1:3). The 23rd Psalm elaborates on the metaphor of the Lord as a shepherd. The Lord does not literally use a rod and a staff (Psalm 23:4). These

tools of the shepherd represent God's ministering and comforting presence with us.

3. Observe the literary style. Learning about some of the common styles of Hebrew poetry will help us interpret the book of Psalms and other poetic texts in the Bible.

One feature of Hebrew poetry to watch for is repetition. Sometimes a key word may occur repeatedly in a psalm, such as the word righteous in Psalm 11. This gives us insight into the theme or key thought.

Hebrew poetry also frequently contains parallelism, a method in which one line helps to interpret another.

- *Synonymous Parallelism:* The second line restates the first in different words: "When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue" (Psalm 114:1).
- *Antithetic Parallelism:* Two lines form a contrast: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. . . . But his delight is in the law of the LORD" (Psalm 1:1–2).
- *Synthetic Parallelism:* This form is similar to synonymous parallelism, but the second line advances the thought of the first: "But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night" (Psalm 1:2).

Wisdom

Wisdom is a valuable perspective on life that informs us as we make our decisions. A truly wise person knows firsthand, by years of observation, what the consequences are to various decisions people make throughout life.

Biblical wisdom goes beyond this. It makes God the fountainhead of wisdom. Proverbs 1:7 says, "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." According to biblical wisdom, the starting point for gaining wisdom is to orient one's life to God and seek to please Him and learn from Him.

The books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are collections of wisdom sayings designed to help people make good and responsible decisions in life. Most of the sayings are worded in concise and catchy ways to help the Hebrew people memorize them. Some of this word play is obviously lost in the translation to English. Like poetry, the proverbs normally employ various forms of parallelism and make ample use of metaphors. In applying the proverbs to our lives, we need to guard against an over-literalism on two fronts:

1. Proverbs point to the truth without saying everything about it. The proverbs should be seen as general principles for guiding our behavior and choices. When we read in Proverbs 12:5 that "the plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful," it does not mean that we should take advice only from Christians. A non-Christian financial planner may have some very sound ideas for helping a Christian avoid undue debt and put together a good budget. In general, the proverb is better interpreted to mean that Christians need to be discerning in taking advice from non-Christians, especially as it regards ethical and spiritual matters.

2. Proverbs are not formulas. As Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart point out, "proverbs are not legal guarantees from God." They point to particular outcomes that are likely to follow when one chooses a certain course of action. One may think of many exceptions to the saying, "If a king judges the poor with fairness, his throne will always be secure" (Proverbs 29:14). This verse certainly cannot be taken as a guarantee that leaders will remain in political office as long as they act righteously and fairly (however much we wish this were the case). In principle, the proverb teaches that people will typically respect and favor a civic or political leader who acts out of principle and fairly resolves disputes and allocates resources.

Parables

Jesus was a storyteller. He would often tell a story in order to make a point. The gospel writers refer to His stories as parables.

Some people have misunderstood Jesus' parables as elaborate allegorical mysteries about the Church in which every detail had a hidden meaning. Thus, in Jesus' famous parable about the Good Samaritan, some have seen the Samaritan as representing Christ, the man who fell victim as Adam, Jerusalem as the heavenly city of peace from which Adam fell, and the thieves as the devil and his evil angels. Such an interpretation requires a fertile imagination. So what is the proper way of interpreting a parable? How do we avoid a novel interpretation never intended by our Lord?

Some Bible teachers have reacted to this extensive allegorizing and have suggested that only one point exists in any parable. They say the various details of the story only add to the color and drama of the parable. For instance, some would say that in the parable of the Prodigal Son, the main point is the generous forgiveness of the Father. But even if that is the focal point, can't we learn anything from the attitude of the older brother?

A number of Bible teachers are now saying, correctly, I believe, that a limited amount of allegorical interpretation is appropriate when interpreting the parables. Consider the following when you interpret a parable:

1. Who are the main characters? The different characters in the parable provide different points of view about the action described in the parable. In his excellent book *Interpreting the Parables*, Craig Blomberg suggests that the relevant teaching of the parable often revolves around these characters.

2. Look for contextual clues for interpreting the parable. The introduction to the parable, the context of the parable, and the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus' speaking of the parable will help in accurately grasping what the parable teaches. Jesus told a parable about a king going on a trip and leaving money to his servants to invest (Luke 19:11–27). As it turns out, some invest well and one does not; the good investors are rewarded and the poor one is punished. Luke introduces the parable, however, with the comment that Jesus told the parable "because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once" (Luke 19:11). Clearly, then, one of the main points of the parable is the fact that the King (Jesus) would delay the complete establishment of His Kingdom.

3. Investigate the historical details. We cannot fully appreciate the teaching of the parables until we understand certain cultural, social, political, and historical ideas of the times. Without sensing the terrible racial tension between Samaritans and Jews, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan loses its punch. For these matters, use a good Bible encyclopedia.

4. Consider the parable from the point of view of each main character. While a parable may contain a number of valid points, these lessons generally stem from the perspective of each of the primary characters. For instance, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), we can derive three lessons related to each of the three characters: (1) the prodigal son teaches us about the importance of repentance, (2) the father's response to his repentant son gives us an appreciation about God's incredible love and forgiveness, and (3) the example of the older brother warns us against cold-heartedness.

5. Translate the lessons into our context. The final step is to restate the lessons of the parable in ways that apply to our lives.

Prophecy

Perhaps one of the most hotly debated areas of scriptural interpretation has centered on prophecy. Much of the debate has focused on the book of Revelation and passages throughout the Bible that speak of what is yet to come. As a result of this confusion, some Christians have tended to neglect the study of prophetic texts. They may not want to enter the dispute, or they may think that if the experts disagree, how do they have a chance of figuring it out!

Nearly one-fifth of the Bible consists of prophecy. Therefore, it is important to spend some time thinking about how to properly interpret these passages. Keep the following points in mind as you interpret biblical prophecy:

1. Read the whole prophecy. One verse or passage cannot be isolated from the context of the whole prophecy. Carefully read the whole section, in light of the entire book.

2. Familiarize yourself with the historical context. All of the prophecies were spoken to God's people at specific times and in particular situations. Most of the Old Testament prophecies relate directly to Israel's exile and return from exile. Once again, a good Bible encyclopedia will help you understand the historical setting.

3. Is the passage Messianic? There are many Old Testament prophecies that point to the coming and work of the Messiah, Jesus (see Isaiah 9; Isaiah 11; Isaiah 52–53). A sure way to determine this is to see what prophecies are quoted or alluded to in the New Testament as fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

4. Has the passage been fulfilled? Most of the Old Testament prophecies have already been fulfilled. For instance, God has already judged Babylon, Assyria, the Philistines, Moab, Damascus, Cush, and Egypt in fulfillment of Isaiah 13–21.

5. Consider the possibility of multiple fulfillment. One unique characteristic of biblical prophecy is the possibility of a double or even triple fulfillment. Daniel prophesied the coming of an "abomination" that would desolate the temple (Daniel 9:27; Daniel 11:31; Daniel 12:31). This was originally fulfilled in 167 BC when the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanes entered the holiest place of the Temple and forced the Jews to sacrifice pigs on the altar. This prophecy was fulfilled again in events surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. It will be fulfilled finally in the course of events at the end of time (see Mark 13:14).

6. Decide what is to be taken literally and what is to be taken symbolically. This is perhaps the most difficult part of interpreting the book of Revelation. Certainly not everything can be taken literally, but much can be. No one really expects a literal eagle to rescue a pregnant woman and fly her to the desert (Rev. 12:13–17). The symbols represent another reality either in the past (from our perspective) or yet to occur in the future. We need to be careful how we interpret the meaning of the symbols. It is doubtful that the eagle represents the United States, as someone once suggested, in spite of the fact that the eagle is our national symbol. We need to interpret the symbolism in terms of how it would have been understood by its original readers. Since the interpretation of this kind of prophetic symbolism is so difficult, it is probably best not to hold on to a given interpretation with unbending certitude.

7. Ask yourself what you can learn about God and His ways. Since the primary function of prophecy was not to serve as a timetable of future events, it is important for us not to limit our expectations of what we may learn from prophetic texts. For instance, try reading the book of Revelation attempting to answer the questions: Who is Jesus? and, What did He come to do? You will be surprised at how much you learn.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Taking Scripture Literally*



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