

“Biblical Interpretation: Historical Context” – Reading the Bible For All Its Worth, Part 2 – Don DeVries – January 15, 2012

Introduction

1. On a retreat in 2007 in Northern Minnesota, John Piper wrote of the morning he heard the voice of God:

“As I prayed and mused, suddenly it happened. God said, “Come and see what I have done.” There was not the slightest doubt in my mind that these were the very words of God...God was speaking to me with absolute authority...

I wondered what he meant by “come and see.” Would he take me somewhere, like he did Paul into heaven?...Did “see” mean that I would have a vision of some great deed of God?...Then he said, as clearly as any words have ever come into my mind, “I am awesome in my deeds toward the children of man.” My heart leaped up, “Yes, Lord! You are awesome in your deeds...Yes! Now what will you show me?”

The words came again. Just as clear as before, but increasingly specific: “I turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There they rejoiced in me—who rules by my might forever.” Suddenly I realized God was taking me back several thousand years to the time when he dried up the Red Sea and the Jordan River...This is what he meant by “come and see”...These were the “awesome deeds” he referred to. God himself was narrating the mighty works of God...

There settled over me a wonderful reverence...As I marveled at his power to dry the sea and the river, he spoke again. “I keep watch over the nations—let not the rebellious exalt themselves.” This was breathtaking...He may as well have taken me by the collar of my shirt, lifted me off the ground with one hand, and said, with an incomparable mixture of fierceness and love, “Never, never, never exalt yourself. Never rebel against me.”

I sat staring at nothing. My mind was full of the global glory of God. “I keep watch over the nations.”...Think of it. Marvel at this...The God who keeps watch over the nations, like some people keep watch over...stock markets or construction sites—this God still speaks in the twenty-first century. I heard his very words. He spoke personally to me.

What effect did this have on me? It filled me with a fresh sense of God’s reality. It assured me more deeply that he acts in history and in our time. It strengthened my faith that he is for me and cares about me and will use his global power to watch over me. Why else would he come and tell me these things?

Sermon Outline

It has [also] increased my love for the Bible as God's very word because it was through the Bible that I heard these divine words, and through the Bible I have experiences like this almost every day." (from: www.desiringgod.org/blog/posts/the-morning-i-heard-the-voice-of-god)

2. Every time we open our Bibles and read it, God is right there ready to speak to us, ready to reveal Himself, ready to fellowship with us, and ready to encourage our heart. God still speaks in the 21st century through His Word.

Who Determines the Meaning of the Text?

1. Option #1: The reader determines the meaning. This is the dominant approach in our culture to literature and, oftentimes, to the Bible. This is also called the "reader-response" approach. The reader determines what is meant and comes up with whatever he or she thinks is an appropriate meaning. It can mean one thing to you, but what matters is what it means to me.
 - a. The problem with this interpretive approach is that it leads to multiple and often-contradictory meanings. Absolutes are unwelcome because in our post-modern culture, it is seen as arrogant to insist on only one interpretation.
2. Option #2: The author determines the meaning. This approach places the author of the text as the ultimate arbiter of meaning. This is the approach that is the appropriate and right way to handle God's word.
 - a. The main argument for this method is that it is the commonsense approach to communication. The one who says something or writes something is the one who has invested meaning in what is communicated. Communication only goes forward when we respond to the meaning intended by the speaker or writer.
3. Part of rightly interpreting God's Word is to uncover the meaning a biblical text would have had to its original human author and readers. Pastor John Loftness coined an acronym and question to capture this principle: **W-D-A**. What is the **W**riter of this **D**ocument trying to say to his original **A**udience?
 - a. There is an important implication of this approach: Since the meaning of the text is what the author intended, there is only *one meaning* for the text. However, from the principles of the text, there can be *multiple applications*.

Sermon Outline

What is Biblical Interpretation: A Description

1. Biblical interpretation engages a process to understand the inspired human author's original meaning and applies the biblical truths to our 21st century lives. This description captures 2 distinct steps.
 - a. Step 1 – Understanding the Passage (also called exegesis): Exegesis explains or brings out (“leads or guides out”) the original meaning of the text as it was intended by the original author and understood by the original readers. This involves understanding the:
 - i. Historical and Literary Context of a book or passage
 - ii. Content (words and grammar) of a book or passage
 - b. Step 2 – Application: applying biblical principles to our lives today.
2. To understand the process of interpretation, imagine a river with a bridge over it. The river represents the gaps that separate us from the biblical writers – history, culture, customs, time, geography, etc. The bridge represents the process of Biblical interpretation.
 - a. We live on one side of the bridge in 21st America. However, we must begin the process of rightly interpreting God's Word by crossing the bridge that takes us back 2,000-3,500 years into the world of the Bible authors and readers. Here we do the work of exegesis by looking through their eyes and understanding what they wrote and why they wrote it.
 - i. We want to understand the history and customs of the time in which it was written.
 - ii. We want to uncover why the author wrote what he did, what he wrote and how his book was composed.
 - iii. And we want to seek to understand how the original readers might have understood what was written.
 - b. Then we must cross the bridge back to our day and time and do the work of application: how do the biblical principles apply to my life, marriage, friendships, parenting, work, and so forth?

Sermon Outline

Example of Biblical Interpretation: Isaiah 40:10-31

1. To rightly understand Isaiah 40:10-31, we must first go back to Isaiah's time and understand his original intent and what the original audience would have understood.
 - a. In Isaiah chapters 1-38, Isaiah prophesied about rising dominance of Assyria, the dominant political and military power. He predicted judgment through Assyrian invasion on the Northern Kingdom Israel, judgment on the surrounding nations and the siege of Jerusalem during Hezekiah's reign – all happened during his lifetime.
 - b. But then in Isaiah chapter 39, Isaiah prophesies to Judah that the real threat is the Babylonians. Because of Hezekiah's disobedience, Isaiah foresaw captivity for Judah at the hands of the Babylonians. In the early 7th and late 6th century, Isaiah's prophecy came true: the Babylonians conquered Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple.
 - c. Isaiah chapters 40-55 look to a time that occurred over a century after Isaiah was dead. The historical setting of chapter 40 is a people under judgment in captivity in Babylon. The Jews were a defeated people languishing in exile. Babylon's army seemed unstoppable. Their rulers had absolute, dictatorial authority. The Babylonian gods seem all-wise and all-powerful. Under the mighty hand of Babylon, the Jewish exiles felt hopeless, discouraged, weary and forgotten. God seemed far away and uninterested.
 - d. Into that historical setting of a discouraged people, God spoke to his people:
 - i. You are not forgotten. You are still My people and I will tend you as a shepherd and gather you in my arms (verses 10-11).
 - ii. And Babylon's gods? They fall in comparison to my unequalled greatness and unmatched power (verses 12-14).
 - iii. And the nation of Babylon? Compared to my immensity, they are a drop in the bucket. No, they are dust on the scales. No, they are nothing. No, they are less than nothing (verses 15-17).
 - iv. And Babylon's rulers? I alone am sovereign over every authority. I blow on them and they come to nothing (verses 22-24).
 - v. And you think I have forgotten you? If I have named the countless stars in the heavens and not one of them is missing, I will not forget you. Your way is not hidden from me (verses 25-31).

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- e. To a people languishing in exile, discouraged and hopeless, these words would have brought much hope, comfort and assurance.
2. Second, we must walk back across the bridge to the 21st century and ask, "How do these words apply to me and my life?" Obviously we are not slaves to a foreign power.
 - a. But have you ever felt like circumstances were overwhelming and God seem distant, almost unconcerned? He knows your name. Your way is not hidden from the Lord. He will wield His power to renew and strengthen you in your weariness.
 - b. In the midst of trials and difficulties, have circumstances become BIG and God become small? God's power, wisdom, sovereignty and authority are infinitely greater than any circumstance in which we find ourselves. And like a loving shepherd, he will care for us and carry us.
 - c. Have you ever been perplexed by your circumstances, wondering what God is up to? We may not understand all that God is doing, but these verses about God's unsearchable wisdom and knowledge can give us hope that He knows what is best for us.
 - d. Have you ever been anxious or fearful about the power and influence wielded by evil rulers or nations, or maybe the power wielded by your boss? God is sovereignly in control. No one – nations, rulers, bosses, any authority – upends God's absolute, sovereign oversight and rule.
 3. That is an example of biblical interpretation. You walk across the bridge into the world of the biblical writer and ask: what is this writer of this document trying to say to his original audience. Then you walk back across to the 21st century and ask how the principles and truths apply to my life.