

## **Introduction**

Feed a cold; starve a fever. Butter is good for burns. And storing batteries in a refrigerator extends their life. Those are examples of what we call "old wives' tales." Storing batteries in a refrigerator, for instance, doesn't extend their life at all. Which illustrates what old wives' tales are. They're propositions that people widely hold to be true, but that aren't true. Today, I'm going to address an old wives' tale about the Bible, one that 2 Peter 1:19-21 helps us identify and reject.

## **What Scripture Is**

Let's start with the term "**Scripture**" in verse 20. The Scripture or Bible of Peter and first century Christians was the 39 Book of the Old Testament. That Bible of theirs was divided into three sections: (1) the Law (Genesis through Deuteronomy); (2) the Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and what we call the "12 minor prophets," Hosea through Malachi), and (3) the Writings (the remaining 17 books).

That helps us understand the meaning of a term in verse 19, "**the prophetic word.**" It refers to the 17 books that make up "The Prophets" section of the Hebrew Bible. Notice what Peter writes about those books in verse 19, "**So we have the prophetic word made sure.**" The pronoun "**we**" refers to the apostles and him and what they taught. His point is that the prophetic books confirm the truth of their teaching.

There's a reason they do. According to verse 21, it's because they were not "**made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.**" The Greek word translated "**moved**" refers to wind carrying the sails of a ship along with it. In the same way, the Holy Spirit carried or bore the writers of the prophetic books along with Him so that they wrote what He wanted written. He worked in their mental, emotional, and volitional processes, in other words, so that they wrote what He wanted written. We use a term for that, "**inspired.**" The prophetic books are the inspired word of God.

I don't have time to explain how we know it, but the other 49 books of the Bible are as well. They're inspired. The Holy Spirit carried their writers along with Him so that they wrote what He wanted written.

### An Old Wives' Tale

You realize of course what that means. The Bible is utterly significant and unique. It's essential, therefore, that we understand it, that is, that we understand the meaning of what the Holy Spirit wrote.

Suppose a person tells us he was going to propose to his girlfriend but is getting cold feet. The first thing we do is determine what he means. Is he speaking literally? Does he mean that his feet are actually cold. Or is he speaking figuratively? Does he mean that he's fearful of proposing and having second thoughts? That illustrates what our first responsibility is when someone writes or says something to us. It's to understand the meaning of what he wrote or said.

The Bible is no exception. Proverbs 29:18, for instance, says, **"Where there is no vision, the people perish."** The Holy Spirit wrote that text and every text in the Bible to us, and our first responsibility is to understand what they mean. So let's examine that – what they mean.

I once talked with a skeptical attorney who said about the Bible, **"It means whatever anyone thinks it means."** Many Christians believe that very same thing. I've heard at least five Bible study leaders ask the members of their groups, **"What does this verse mean to you?"** Or just a month ago, I heard a long-established Christian say, **"I know everyone has their own interpretations, but this is what the parable of the Good Samaritan means to me."**

It's clear what those statements imply. The meaning of a text is whatever its readers determine it to be. That is a philosophical point of view that began developing in the 1920's and is widely embraced today. It contends that a text doesn't have just one valid meaning. It has multiple valid meanings that are whatever its readers determine them to be. The meaning of a text, in other words, is **"what it means to me."**

Let's go back to Proverbs 29:18. Tony Campolo understands it to mean this: **"Without personal dreams about the future, we are all dead. We settle into a routinized lifestyle devoid of joy."** But I understand it to mean this. When people reject the Bible's as God's authoritative word, they "run wild" as we say it now. Anything goes.

Those are two entirely different understandings of the text. But according to many Christians, both are valid. It means one thing to Campolo and a different thing to me but that's OK. His understanding is as valid as mine and mine is as valid as his.

### **The Truth**

Do you know what that is? It's an old wives' tale. We see that in verse 20. Peter writes, **"No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation."** The words **"of one's own interpretation"** refer to the writers of the Bible. Peter's point is that they didn't make up what they wrote. The Holy Spirit did. He, not they, determined the content and presentation of what they wrote.

That implies a vital truth. Every text has only one valid meaning, not many. And that valid meaning is the one that the Holy Spirit intended it to have. We call what I'm talking about **"the plain meaning of the text."** That plain meaning is what the Holy Spirit and His writers intended to say. Consequently, what a text **"means to me"** has nothing to do with what it **"actually means."** There's only one valid meaning.

Why then do Christians understand texts so differently? It's because many don't know how to interpret them. There's something we need to know. There are rules for interpreting the Bible. Many Christians reject that fact. Their view is that since the Holy Spirit wrote the Bible, He'll interpret it as well. So, forget about rules and just rely on Him.

But I'd say two things in response. First, whether we recognize it or not, we all follow rules for interpreting the Bible. The issue isn't whether or not we follow rules, because we do. The issue is whether or not we follow the right ones. And second, understanding the Bible is a

partnership between the Holy Spirit and us. Our part is to learn and apply the rules. His part is to enhance and guide our efforts in doing so. When that happens, we usually understand the plain meaning of the texts. When it doesn't happen, we usually don't. Which explains why Christians have different understandings of texts. It's 's because some are following and others are violating the rules for interpreting them.

## Understand Scripture

That makes our calling clear. Learn and apply the rules for interpreting the Bible. To assist you in doing that, I'm going to identify and briefly explain four of the most important of those.

First, concentrate and use good sense. In Matthew 5:40, for instance, Jesus says, **"If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also."** The word **"sue"** shows the text is about a lawsuit. **"Anyone"** is the plaintiff and **"you"** are the defendant. The plaintiff gets a judgment against you. But he has further need and because you can meet it, you do. Notice what I did. I concentrated and used good sense. I approached the text thoughtfully and logically.

There's a second rule for interpreting the Bible. Be contextual. Every text has four basic contexts: the entire Bible, the Testament it's in, the book it's in, and most importantly, the passage it's in. The passage it's in is called **"immediate context"** and is the verses before and after it. It's absolutely imperative that we interpret the Bible contextually.

In John 3:5, for instance, Jesus says, **"I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God."** Some Christians take the phrase **"born of water"** to mean baptism. But the largest context, the entire Bible, shows it cannot mean that. What does it mean then? The immediate context shows us. Verse 4 refers to being born physically. And the phrase **"born of water"** has a parallel phrase in verse 6, **"born of the flesh,"** which also refers to being born physically. That indicates to what the word **"water"** refers. It's the amniotic fluid in our mother's womb. Verse 5 means this then.

We must first of all exist (be born of the flesh) and second of all be saved (be born of the Spirit) to enter the kingdom of God.

The single biggest mistake that Christians make with the Bible is taking texts out of their immediate context, interpreting them in isolation from that. That's why, for example, almost all Christians misinterpret Psalm 46:10, Jeremiah 29:11, and Philippians 4:13. It's a fundamental principle. Scripture interprets Scripture. So, be contextual.

A third rule for interpreting the Bible is bridge the gaps. In some texts, there are distances or gaps between the original writers and the readers. And we have to bridge those gaps to interpret them correctly. There are three such gaps.

#1 – Historical gap. We have to sometimes know historical facts to understand a text. Why did Jonah, for instance, not want to preach to Nineveh – not want it to repent? It was because of the political and economic climate of his day. So, we have to bridge the historical gap (know that climate) to understand the message of the book.

#2 – Cultural gap. There are sometimes great differences between the cultures of the original writers and our own. Two cultural facts, for instance, underlie Jesus' teaching on divorce in Matthew 5:32: the divorce laws of His day and the options open to divorced women. So, we have to bridge the cultural gap (know those facts) to understand it.

#3 – Linguistic gap. The meaning of words and phrases, the grammar, and the structure of the Biblical languages are sometimes different than our own. Consequently, we have to sometimes know those differences to understand a text. In 1 Corinthians 7:1, for instance, Paul writes, **"It is good for a man not to touch a woman."** In the English language, the phrase **"touch a woman"** has only a literal meaning, which is have physical contact of any kind. But in the Greek language, it is also an idiom that can mean to marry a woman. So, we have to bridge the linguistic gap (know that idiom) to understand the verse.

Bridging those three gaps when texts have them is something all of us must do. And we can because of the outstanding resources that are

available to us: Bible dictionaries, handbooks, and commentaries. When we think there might be a gap in a text, consult those resources, especially Bible commentaries, and we'll be able to bridge it.

There's a fourth rule for interpreting the Bible. Take genres into account. Genres are literary forms. The primary genres in the Bible are narrative, law, poetry, proverb, prophecy, parable, epistle, and apocalypse. Each Biblical book is in one or more of those literary forms.

Now, there are different rules for interpreting each genre. So, we learn the rules for interpreting each genre and apply them to the texts that are in that genre.

Judges 6:36-40 is a classic example of what I mean. This text is narrative. It tells a story in other words, in this case, about Gideon and the fleece. Many Christians think it teaches a method of divine guidance called "**laying out a fleece.**" So that's what they do. They lay out a fleece of some kind in order to know what God wants them to do. But if they knew the rules for interpreting narratives, they'd wouldn't. They'd realize that the moral of this narrative isn't about divine guidance. It's about Gideon's distrust of God. They'd also realize that "**laying out a fleece**" isn't a God-ordained method of guidance.

Those then are four defining rules for interpreting the Bible. I explain and illustrate them and the others in a detailed study I wrote titled *Biblesmiths*. If you'd like a copy, let me know.

## **Conclusion**

I close with an observation. Feed a cold; starve a fever. Butter is good for burns. Storing batteries in a refrigerator extends their life. And the meaning of a Biblical text is "**what it means to me.**" Those propositions have something in common. They're old wives' tales, including the last one. The meaning of a Biblical text is not "**what it means to me.**" It is "**what it means to the Holy Spirit.**" So learn and apply the rules for interpreting the Bible. We'll understand just that if we do, what it means to the One who wrote it, the Holy Spirit.