



Biblical Hermeneutics: Principles for Bible Interpretation

2. Read the Bible as You Would Any Book

The first guideline for reading the Bible is that it should be read as we would any book. But before we explain that we need to state an important caveat.

The Bible is not *like* any book. Paul referred to the Scriptures as being “God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). Elsewhere he refers to the Scriptures as “the very words of God” (Romans 3:2). Most importantly, we must approach Scripture as Jesus did, who said, “not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law (i.e., Scriptures) until everything is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). Jesus always spoke with confidence in the accuracy and authority of every word of the Scriptures.

What we mean by “read the Bible like any other book” is that we should read narrative as narrative, letters as letters, metaphors as metaphors, poetry as poetry and so on. For example, the stories of Jesus’ miracles should be read as historical events and not myths or allegories since they are presented as historical events. Letters were written to real people in real situations and should be read that way. Metaphors should not be taken as literal. Poetry may express hyperbole (exaggeration to make a point).

Perhaps the most frequent mistake Bible readers make is to treat the Bible as if it communicates God’s will to us mystically or magically. One of the most common ways people do this is by what R.C. Sproul calls “luckydipping” (Knowing Scripture p.64). Sometimes a person who is looking for guidance from God will close his/her eyes, open up the Bible and put a finger on a page blindly. They hope that the verse they are touching will communicate God’s will to them. Less extreme, but equally bad, is to assume that the words of the Bible are written to you in your circumstance. While the Bible is written *for* you it is not written *to* you in that way. No, the Bible is written to others in their circumstances. We are to first understand what the Bible meant to them and then apply that lesson to ourselves in our circumstances.

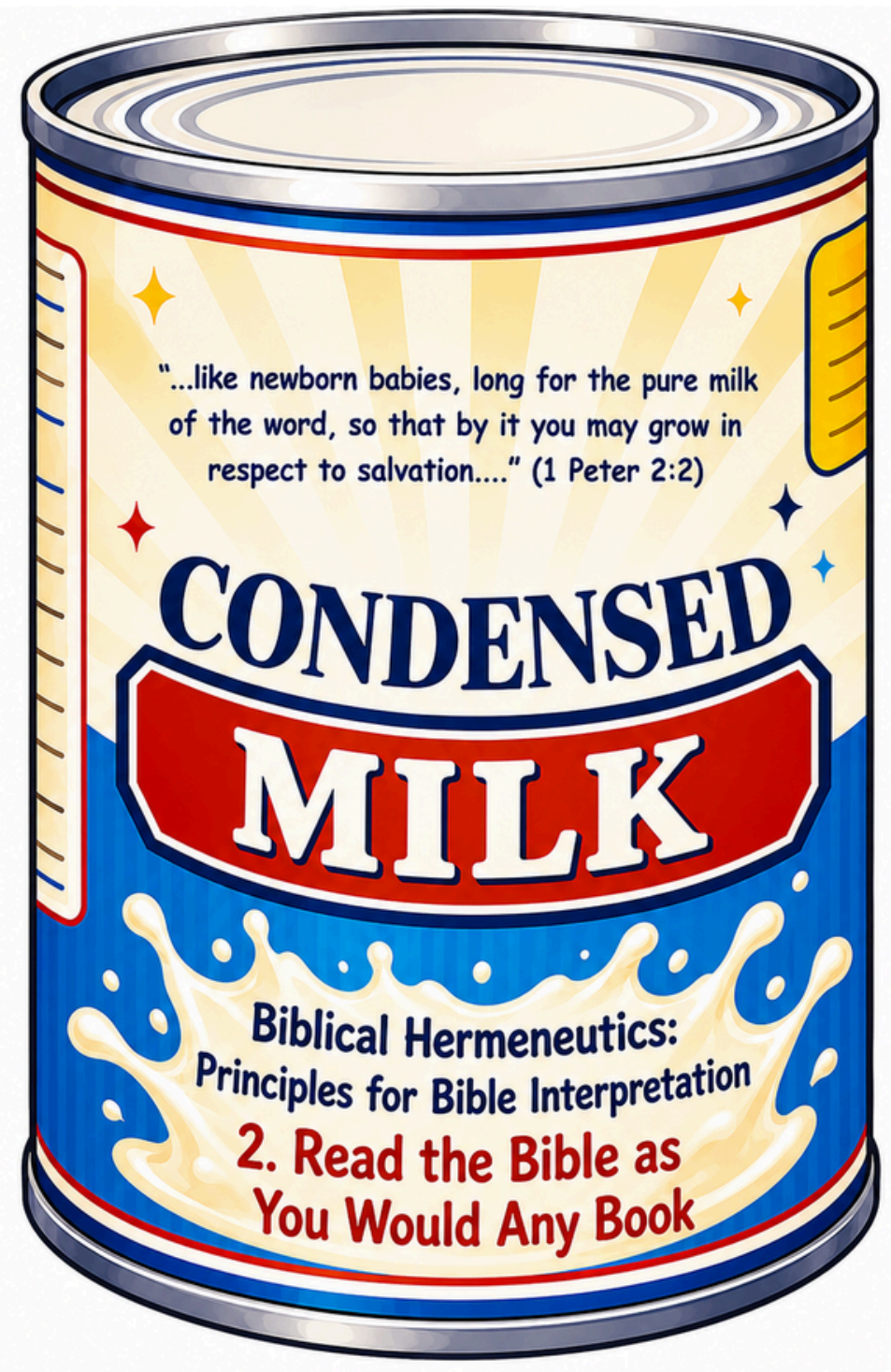
The Bible is to be read in its literal sense, that is, its natural sense and proper context. As Clark Pinnock has written, “We are to ascertain what the writer wished to say by interpreting his words according to the customary, socially accepted meaning of those words” (Biblical Revelation, p. 210). We are not

to interpret the Bible according to what we hope it will say or based on a feeling, a bias, or the current cultural values. What did the author mean to teach? That is the question and everything else must be pushed aside.

Finally, Christians have historically believed in the clarity (or perspicuity) of Scripture. It is simple and clear enough that any literate person can understand its basic meaning. This does not mean that no part of it is hard to understand but the essential content is clear. Remember, the Bible was first written for average people and was meant to be understood.

When I was eighteen and not yet enthused about God, I arrived home from work and decided I should read my Bible. I was not doing much of that at the time so I opened it up randomly, dropped my finger on the page, and began reading. I read the parable of the four kinds of ground (hearts) on which the gospel message falls, only one of which produces fruit. It was a short parable and so I closed my Bible, opened it again, dropped my finger down and started reading. To my surprise I began reading the same parable in a different gospel. Now intrigued, I closed my Bible and, again, did some “luckydipping”. As impossible as it seems I immediately read the same parable, for a third time, in a third gospel. I could not do that again if I tried. The lesson I took from that was, “Wow! Isn’t that amazing!” The lesson should have been a very loud, “What kind of ground are you?” It wasn’t.

The Bible is to be read like any book. But because it is a living word from God, we should read with an expectation that God is going to say something about himself or about ourselves in the words we read. “What is God saying to me?” should be the question in our minds as we read.



"...like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation...." (1 Peter 2:2)

CONDENSED MILK

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