



Principles in the Old Testament For Understanding God's Will



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One of the attributes of God is His rational nature. God is inherently logical, rational, and reasonable. He is a God of truth. He created humans in His own image, which includes this same rational nature. The human mind was created by God to function rationally. God's communication to humanity presupposes this feature. The Bible was written in human language, and it was written in such a way that it assumes that its intended meanings may be understood correctly. In fact, within the Bible itself, beginning in the Old Testament, are found the hermeneutical principles by which the reader may understand the intended meanings. These principles are not "new" principles, developed by modern scholars, and unable to be known and utilized by ancient man. Rather, they were embedded in the Old Testament thousands of years ago for all who are willing to dig deeply enough into God's Word to discover them.

This section summarizes six key principles apparent in the Old Testament that are indispensable to properly understanding the Bible. Many Bible passages demand that the reader of the Bible apply simple-but-necessary principles of interpretation in order to arrive at the meaning God intended.

Principle 1: Absolute Truth Is Attainable

Absolute, objective truth exists and can be known. The human mind can come to a knowledge of that truth. The Old Testament everywhere assumes that humans can and must come to the knowledge of absolute truth. Solomon said to "buy the truth, and do not sell it, also wisdom and instruction and understanding" (Proverbs 23:23). Both Isaiah and Jeremiah affirmed that people can, and must, be taught in order to come to knowledge of those things that must be known (Isaiah 54:13; Jeremiah 31:34; cf. John 6:45; 7:17). Moses stressed to the Israelites that it would be absolutely imperative for them to teach their children those things that would be necessary to please God (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). Moses also explained that the purpose of the desert hardships was to make the Israelites "know

that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 8:3). If all of life is to be governed by the words that proceed from God, humans are capable of comprehending those words and coming to a correct understanding of what is required of them.

Moses further pointed out that “the secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deuteronomy 29:29).

Certainly, there are many things that humans cannot know—things far beyond our limited capability to understand (Romans 11:33). However, God has revealed certain truths that we are well capable of grasping, and that God expects us to comprehend. These truths “belong” to us. That is, they are directed to us, and we will be held accountable for our reaction to them. Sadly, many people dwell on matters that cannot be fully known, while they neglect those things for which they will be held responsible in eternity. No wonder God frequently issued warnings against being ignorant, uninformed, or resistant to knowing (Isaiah 1:3; 5:13; Jeremiah 9:6; Hosea 4:6).

Solomon observed that the words of God’s wisdom “are all plain to him who understands, and right to those who find knowledge” (Proverbs 8:9). His wisdom claims that “those who seek me diligently will find me” (Proverbs 8:17). Could Adam and Eve **know** whether it was permissible for them to eat the fruit (Genesis 3:1-3)? Could Cain **know** what sacrifice God expected (Genesis 4:5)? Could Moses **know** whether he should speak to or strike the rock (Numbers 20:8-11)? These instances demonstrate that the perennial problem with humanity is not the ability to come to knowledge of God’s Word; rather, the consistent problem is the will and the desire to conform. Many other passages leave no doubt that God has a body of truth that He has made available to mankind, and He expects every person to use mental faculties and cognitive powers to understand that truth.

Principle 2: Logical Reasoning Is Required

The Old Testament also conveys the idea that in order to arrive at God’s truth, correct reasoning must be employed. Isaiah quoted God’s statement to the nation: “Come now, and let us reason together” (1:18). God later said: “Put Me in remembrance; let us contend together; state your case, that you may be acquitted” (43:26). In his farewell address to the nation, Samuel declared: “Now therefore, stand still, that I may reason with you before the Lord” (1 Samuel 12:7). Solomon insisted that “the first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17). He also said, “the simple believes every word, but the prudent man considers well



his steps” (Proverbs 14:15). We must use our God-given rationality to think clearly, accurately, and logically in our treatment of Scripture, as well as in sorting out the daily affairs of life. These passages teach that we both can, and must, ascertain the correct meaning of Scripture through the proper exercise of our reasoning powers.

Principle 3: Diligent Effort Must Be Expended

The task of learning what God wants us to know requires considerable effort. We must be willing to expend the time and trouble to carefully, prayerfully, and diligently analyze and examine God’s words. Moses underscored this principle in his remarks to the Israelites on the plains of Moab just prior to their entrance into the Land of Canaan. He described the task as requiring constant, consistent attention:

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them **diligently** to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Solomon referred to the attentiveness required to remain true to God: “My son, keep your father’s command, and do not forsake the law of your mother. Bind them **continually** upon your heart; tie them around your neck. When you roam, they will lead you; when you sleep, they will keep you; and when you awake, they will speak with you” (Proverbs 6:20-22). This attentiveness must include an intense desire to pursue, know, and acquire truth—like the psalmist who wanted God’s laws so badly that he could almost taste them (Psalm 19:10). It was to be sought after more than fine gold (Psalm 19:10; 119:127). Most people are simply too busy, or unwilling, to expend effort to such an intensity. Life has too many distractions, and offers too many other interests. But the Bible makes clear that if we wish to understand God’s will for our lives, then arduous, persistent, aggressive effort is essential to know and do that will.

Principle 4: Beware of False Interpretation

A fourth principle found in the Bible is that we must recognize that there are incorrect interpretations and that we are capable of distinguishing the correct from the incorrect. False teachers actually do exist who misrepresent God’s Word and deceive people with incorrect interpretations. God, through Jeremiah, warned the nation: “Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you. They make you worthless; they speak a vision of their own heart, not from the mouth of the Lord” (Jeremiah 23:16). Think of the many con men and shysters throughout Bible history who sought to lead God’s people astray—from Pharaoh’s magicians (Exodus 7:11; 2 Timothy 3:8) and Ahab and Jezebel’s prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19), to Zedekiah (1 Kings

22:11,24) and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28). God expected people to see through their charades and their erroneous ideologies, and to recognize the pure Word of God.

So it is clear that the Old Testament warns of false interpretations and misrepresentations of God's Word. In God's sight, there is only the truth on the one hand, and various departures from that truth on the other hand. All people are required to distinguish between truth and error, and to cling to the truth. "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20).

Principle 5: Remain Within Scriptural Parameters

The Bible also teaches that the interpreter must remain within the framework of Scripture, neither adding to nor subtracting from the written revelation. Moses declared in the long ago: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish ought from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you" (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32).

Solomon said: "Every word of God is pure...add not to His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar" (Proverbs 30:5-6). Jeremiah urged: "Stand in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where the good way is, and walk in it" (Jeremiah 6:16). In other words, the individual is responsible for identifying the limits of God's directives, and then confining himself to those directives. These passages make clear that God has defined the parameters of moral, spiritual, and religious truth for humanity. He expects us to confine ourselves to His instructions in our thinking and practice.

The Old Testament is riddled with instances of people failing to conform themselves precisely to the instructions given to them by God. Cain was neither an atheist nor a reprobate. He, in fact, was a religious individual who was willing to engage in religious worship. He was also to be commended for directing his worship behavior toward the right God. Nevertheless, his slight adjustment in the specifics of worship action evoked God's displeasure (Genesis 4:5; 1 John 3:12). Nadab and Abihu were the right men, at the right time, at the right place, with the right censers, and the right incense. Yet by using the wrong fire, they were destroyed by God (Leviticus 10:1-2). King Saul was censured twice for his unauthorized actions (1 Samuel 13:11-13; 15:19-24). Uzzah was struck dead simply for touching the Ark of the Covenant, though his apparent motive was to protect the Ark (2 Samuel 6:7). David later identified the problem by saying it happened "because we did not consult Him (God) about the proper order" (1 Chronicles 15:13). God's previous instructions on the matter were not followed as they should have been.

Remaining within the framework of Scripture requires a proper recognition of the role of the "silence" of the Scriptures. A misunderstanding occurs in two ways: (1) some reason that if the Bible is silent concerning a particular practice (and therefore does not explicitly condemn it), they are free to engage in that practice; (2) others reason that if the Bible does not mention a practice, then they are not free to engage in that practice. But neither of these viewpoints accounts adequately for the biblical picture.

The Bible may not expressly mention a given item, and yet authorize its use. For example, Noah was told to construct a boat, without being given all of the details about how to do so (Genesis 6:14). He was authorized to achieve the task using a variety of carpentry tools. God's silence on this particular point therefore was **permissive**. On the other hand, God did not explicitly forbid using poplar, cedar, or ash. Rather, He specified "gopherwood." God's silence was therefore restrictive in this case.

Two further examples illustrate this principle. God did not explicitly forbid Nadab and Abihu from using fire from some other source than the one divinely specified. He simply told them what fire they were to use. Use of fire from any other source was an **unauthorized** act, meaning it had not received God's prior approval. The text says that they "offered profane fire before the Lord, **which He had not commanded them**" (Leviticus 10:1). It was not that God had told them **not** to do so; it was that He had not told them **to do it**.

In like manner, when Joshua received instructions from God regarding the proper tactics to be used in conquering the city of Jericho, God spoke in a **positive** fashion, specifying what they were to **do**. He did not tell them what they were **not** to do. The instructions included the act of shouting when the trumpet was sounded (Joshua 6:3-5). However, Joshua—who obviously understood the principle of remaining within the confines of God's instructions, and grasped the concept of restrictive silence—relayed God's instructions to the nation by offering further clarification: "Now Joshua had commanded the people, saying, "You shall not shout or make any noise with your voice, nor shall a word proceed out of your mouth, until the day I say to you, 'Shout!' Then you shall shout" (Joshua 6:10-11). Joshua understood that things could be forbidden by God—not because He explicitly forbade them—but because He simply gave no authority to do them. With diligent and honest study, we, too, can settle questions of interpretation and authority.

Principle 6: Maintain a Receptive Attitude

That brings us to a sixth principle for understanding the Bible. We must have the right mindset, the right attitude, a genuine desire to know the will of God, and an honest heart to accept the truth, no matter how difficult the demands of that truth might be. Solomon noted that "a wise man will hear and increase learning, and a man of understanding will attain wise counsel" (Proverbs 1:5). "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be still wiser; teach a just man, and he will increase in learning" (Proverbs 9:9). These passages make clear that we cannot go to Scripture with the ulterior motive of getting our way or proving our position. We must be eager to learn from Scripture what the Lord intended for us to learn. We must not be like Jeremiah's contemporaries who defiantly asserted: "We will not walk therein" and "We will not listen" (6:16-17).

Conclusion

This extremely brief discussion of interpretation principles that are evident in the Old Testament is certainly not intended to be complete. But it shows how the Old Testament contains within itself

principles by which its truth may be extracted. All accountable humans have it within their power to rise above their prejudices and presuppositions sufficiently to arrive at God's truth—if they genuinely wish to do so. There is simply no such thing as “my interpretation” and “your interpretation.” There is only God's interpretation and God's meaning—and with diligent, rational study, we can arrive at the truth on any subject that is vital to our spiritual well-being.

Rather than shrug off the conflicting views and positions on various subjects, and rather than dismiss religious differences as hopeless, irresolvable, and irrelevant, we must be about the business of studying and searching God's Book, cautiously refraining from misinterpreting and misusing Scripture. If we will give diligent and careful attention to the task with an honest heart that is receptive to the truth, we can be certain of our ability to come to the knowledge of God's will. The Old Testament is an appropriate place to commence this quest.

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