

# SELF-FEEDER

Traps in Bible Interpretation  
November 5, 2023

After having considered the storyline of Scripture and after unpacking our “E.A.R.S.” method for studying Scripture, it is necessary to consider both traps and tips associated with Bible study. We will consider tips for Bible study in our next chapter. For now, we want to consider traps we often encounter. To become solid self-feeders, it is necessary to be aware of the most common mistakes people make in Bible interpretation.

It is important to note that Bible study can indeed be a difficult task. None of us will be perfect at interpreting Scripture. We will make mistakes and errors at times. The reality is that we all “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12). As long as we are finite beings on this fallen planet, we will struggle with perfectly understanding God’s Word. Peter even acquiesced to such realities. In one of his letters, he openly spoke of how Paul’s letters had some things that were “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). Most of us would heartily agree that there are difficult things to understand in Paul’s writings! Regardless, Peter immediately encouraged his readers to not lose heart but to “...grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

R.C. Sproul often said, “It’s not enough to read the Bible – we must study the Bible.”<sup>1</sup> In what follows, we will prepare ourselves to be better students of the Bible. To do so, we will focus on traps many fall into when interpreting Scripture. If we want to be healthy self-feeders, we must stay aware of such things.

## **THE ALLEGORY TRAP**

Throughout church history, one of the most famous traps in Bible interpretation has been that of allegory. The method involves taking the Bible in a non-literal fashion. It sees a secret meaning behind the words, characters, objects, and principles within the pages of Scripture. One has defined the allegorical approach as “The interpretation of Scripture by use of allegory in which passages are seen to have a hidden, spiritual meaning beyond the literal reading.”<sup>2</sup>

Strictly defined, an allegory involves the use of symbols, stories, or spoken word to represent a secretive meaning. The American Heritage Dictionary has defined allegory as “The representation of abstract ideas or principles by characters, figures, or events in narrative, dramatic, or pictorial form.”<sup>3</sup> Many of the most cherished works of

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<sup>1</sup> Nichols, J. *Stephen. R.C. Sproul: A Life.* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2021), 302.

<sup>2</sup> McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fifth Edition.* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2016). 46.

literature in English literature are allegorical in nature. C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia" and J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings" are examples of the allegorical genre. Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" is another example. One of the most beloved works of literature amongst Protestant evangelicals is that of "The Pilgrim's Progress." It is an allegory on the Christian experience.

Allegory can have a rightful place in literature; however, interpreting the Bible through the lens of allegory is most often ill-advised. Sure, there are some passages of Scripture that use allegory. The book of Revelation certainly has its share of allegorical meanings. Consider John's reference to "the beast" (Revelation 13:1), "the great prostitute" (Revelation 17:1), "Babylon" (Revelation 18:2), and more. In addition, Jesus used allegory. Didn't he refer to himself as "living water" (John 4:10), "the bread of life" (John 6:35), and "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11)?

The Bible contains allegory. We must recognize that to be true; however, we should be on guard against a method of Bible interpretation known as "allegorizing." Instead of simply recognizing the true allegories of Scripture, allegorizing goes further. It seeks to understand most of all the Bible through an allegorical approach. Such an approach grew in the early years of Christianity. It perhaps found its roots in a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher named Philo who lived during the First Century. His works would later influence Christian writers like Origen. In time, Christian allegorizing became the predominant form of Bible interpretation from the Sixth Century until the time of the Reformation. Respected Christian theologians like Origen, Jerome, and Augustine all engaged in allegorizing at different levels.<sup>4</sup>

The Reformation did a lot to topple an allegorical approach to interpreting the Bible. However, even some of the most respected Christians and Bible teachers of the last 700 years have engaged in the method. Consider John Bunyan, the Puritan author who penned "Pilgrim's Progress." The man was used mightily by the Lord to preach the gospel and promote Biblical truth, but he sometimes saw the Bible through the same lens of allegory that he used in his popular works of fictional allegory. In his commentary on the creation account of Genesis 1, Bunyan said, "The sun is in this place a type of Christ, the Sun of Righteousness: The moon is a type of the church, in her uncertain condition in this world: The stars are types of the several saints and officers in this church."<sup>5</sup>

While the Bible does indeed use allegory at times, it is best to primarily approach Scripture with a literal approach. This involves attempting to understand verses of Scripture on the basis of word meanings, historical contexts, and the authorial intent of the human authors who penned Scripture. This better path of Bible interpretation is often referred to as "the historical/grammatical approach." In the literal approach, one does not interpret a passage allegorically unless: 1) The use of allegory is indicated within the passage; 2) The context of a passage makes it obvious that the author is

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<sup>4</sup> Elwell, Walter A. ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology: Second Edition*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Offor, George. Ed. *The Works of John Bunyan: Volume Two*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 421.

using allegory.<sup>6</sup> Concerning the historical/grammatical approach, one has said, “The historical/grammatical method does not necessarily exclude an allegorical approach...if the clear meaning of a passage indicates that it be interpreted in that light.”<sup>7</sup>

## **THE ME TRAP**

One of the most common mistakes in modern Bible interpretation involves what I would call “The Me Trap.” This interpretive mistake involves putting oneself at the center of a text of Scripture or a Bible verse. Such a faux pax can happen on one of two levels. First, some interpret the Bible by the standard of what they think the Bible means. Perhaps you have heard this error propagated by well-meaning Sunday school or small group leaders at church who, after reading a passage of Scripture, politely ask, “What do these verses mean to you?” The end result of such an approach to Bible interpretation is often a zany mess. Taking the bait of the leader’s question, participants in the Bible study begin to toss out all types of ideas off the top of their head. In the end, what people think, not what the Bible actually means, is the rule of the day. We must be on guard. One has rightly said, “It is entirely possible to misinterpret the Bible to say things in accord with our inclinations yet misconstrue them as the word of God.”<sup>8</sup>

The second form of “The Me Trap” involves reading oneself into the stories and teachings of Scripture. Some approach the Bible with the idea that they are a character in the cast of Bible characters who make up God’s big story. When they read about David fighting Goliath, they imagine that the story is about them and all of their life battles. In reading of Jeremiah’s cruel imprisonment, they apply the story to their trying relationships with others. Stories about Peter, James, and John leaving their nets to follow Jesus are interpreted as being a clue that they should seek a job change. In every story, letter, and prophecy of Scripture, “The Me Trap” makes us see ourselves as the central character of the Bible.

How can we overcome such inferior forms of Bible interpretation? It is best to remember what we talked about earlier concerning the story and the storyline of Scripture. The Bible is not about you, and it is not about me. It is the story of how God has chosen to redeem a people for himself through his Son — Jesus Christ. The storyline of Scripture tells of how the Lord used successive covenants to accomplish his plan of redemption. The only part that we play in Scripture is that we are sinners who need Christ’s work on our behalf. Yes, application can be made to our lives from Scripture, but such application can only be made when we first gaze upon the truth of Jesus as revealed in the storyline of Scripture.

As long as we are placing ourselves at the center of the story of Scripture, we will certainly fail in our attempts to interpret the Bible. Worst yet, we will ultimately fail spiritually. This is true because we are transformed by fixing the eyes of faith on Jesus,

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<sup>6</sup> Elwell, 45.

<sup>7</sup> Breshears, Jeffrey D. *Introduction to Bibliology*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 150.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Jr., Thomas E. *The Communion Wine Controversy and Will Buell Sprague*. *The Banner of Truth Magazine: 705*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2022), 27.

not ourselves (2 Corinthians 3:18; Hebrews 12:2). Charles Spurgeon rightly said, “No man is capable of virtue as long as self is his object.”<sup>9</sup>

## **THE WORD-MEANING TRAP**

Many sputter and stall in Bible study because of mistakes they make in relation to word meanings. To understand the Bible well, one must understand what words mean. After all, the Bible is a book of words. Consider this — the first edition of the King James Version of the Bible contained 788,820 words! Most modern translations have at least 750,000 words. Words have meaning and the Bible has a lot of words; thus, we must make sure we learn to define and interpret words correctly. In doing this, we must realize that we will encounter several different types of terminology in the Bible.

### **Theological Words**

First, the Bible is chock-full of all types of theological words. It is unlikely that most Bible students are going to automatically know the meaning of words like “justified,” “propitiation,” and “atonement.” To interpret the Bible well, it is often necessary to have a good tool to help you discover the definition of such terms. A good study Bible or commentary can normally help. There are also smart-device apps like “Blue Letter Bible” and “Literal Word” that can be immensely helpful. Finally, if you are serious about Bible study, I would recommend securing a good Bible dictionary. “New Bible Dictionary”<sup>10</sup> and “Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary”<sup>11</sup> are two of my favorites.

### **Obscure or Archaic Words**

Sometimes you run across words in Bible study that aren’t the types of words you use on a regular basis. This is especially true if you use a non-modern translation. Even in newer translations, help can be needed in understanding the meaning of non-familiar words. A basic dictionary can help at this point. I like to use the American Heritage Dictionary.<sup>12</sup> If you are using the King James Version, it can be beneficial to consult Daniel Webster’s original 1828 dictionary, as it gives meaning of some of the words from the King James Version that are now archaic to us.<sup>13</sup>

### **Confusing Words**

The Bible can also use words in a confusing way. A word like “law” can have various meanings. It can refer to God’s Moral Law, but it can also refer to ceremonial and civil

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<sup>9</sup> Spurgeon, C.H. *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Volume 26, 1880*. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 2005), 98.

<sup>10</sup> Marshall, I Howard, A.R. Millard, J.I. Packer and D.J. Wiseman. Eds. *New Bible Dictionary*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Brand, Chad and Eric Mitchell. *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fifth Edition*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Webster, Daniel. *American Dictionary of the English Language*. (Chesapeake, VA: Foundation for American Christian Education, 2000).

laws under the Mosaic Covenant. At times, it is even used of governmental law or law as a principle or precept. Apart from “law,” words like “hate,” “love,” “hope,” “lust,” and more often have different shades of meaning. What is the precise difference between words like “reprove” and “rebuke?” A Bible dictionary or a Bible commentary can help with distinctions and definitions of confusing Bible words.

### **THE CONTEXT TRAP**

One of the most famous of all Scripture errors involves mistakes regarding context. There is an old saying in Bible study that says, “Context is king!” By context, we are referring to the original audience and authorial intent of a given passage of Scripture. In studying the Bible, we must stay aware of such things. We must know the historical background of the writings we are considering. In addition, we must be aware of the reason for an author’s writing and the circumstances facing the original readers of a portion of Scripture.

Next, we must go deeper, considering things like the doctrinal themes surrounding a passage. We must also think about the place of the text we are studying with the overall Bible, placing the passage within the broader context of God’s covenants. Doing such things will insulate us against a tendency to take a passage out of context, making it say whatever we want it to say. Such an approach to Scripture study was foundational to the awakening that changed the world during the Reformation. One has said, “The premodern biblical interpreters sought to discover the author’s intent because they believed that thereby they would discover God’s intent. As Calvin put it, “It is the first business of an interpreter to let his author say what he does say, instead of attributing to him what we think he ought to say.”<sup>14</sup>

### **THE WRONG-VERSE TRAP**

In my time as a pastor and preacher, I’ve noticed a mistake that is easy to make in Bible study. I call it “The Wrong-Verse Trap.” This interpretive error takes place when one makes a conclusion that is Scripturally accurate, yet they do so from a verse that doesn’t actually support the conclusion they make. Though one lands on truth with the Wrong-Verse Trap, one does so without an accurate understanding of the verse they are studying. This mistake may seem to be one of the least harmful of all that we’ve discussed, but it is a mistake, nonetheless. In the end, it can be harmful because it can move the authority of Christian teaching away from the text of Scripture and to the teacher.

I remember learning about this mistake when I was studying for the ministry. I heard the story about another seminary student who preached a sermon for a class assignment. In his sermon, the student fell into the error of the Wrong-Verse Trap. He made truthful statements about Christ and the Christian life; however, the text he chose for his sermon didn’t really teach what he preached. He misinterpreted the text he had been assigned. He proclaimed truth, but he did so from the wrong verse. In evaluating the young man’s sermon, the professor said, “You made a great point, but you chose the wrong text for making your point!”

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<sup>14</sup> Wellum, J. Stephen. *God The Son Incarnate*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016), 73.

I remember hearing a preacher do something similar on one occasion. His text for his sermon was the famous passage on “the Parable of the Good Samaritan” in Luke 10:25-37. The man intended to preach on the subject of personal evangelism and soul winning. In interpreting Jesus’ parable he envisioned the Good Samaritan as representing a soul winner. The beaten man on the side of the road was a helpless sinner who needed someone to share the gospel with him. When the preacher told about the way the Good Samaritan cleaned the beaten man’s wounds, he concluded that such activity represented the way one is forgiven of sin after he or she responds to a gospel appeal. Finally, the preacher reported that the importance of church involvement was implied by the way the Good Samaritan provided the man lodging in a safe place.

The preacher I heard perhaps made two mistakes at once. He was certainly a victim of the Allegory Trap, as he used the allegorical method and avoided the historical/grammatical meaning of Jesus’ story. In addition, he was a victim of the Wrong-Verse Trap. He said a lot of true things; he just used the wrong verse to say them! Believers can avoid such error by carefully interpreting Scripture according to the author’s intent, the cultural and historical background of the text, and the plain meaning of words in the text.

### **THE ONE-VERSE TRAP**

There is a particular Bible interpretation mistake that has led to great harm at various times in church history. The mistake of which I speak involves the tendency of some to erect an entire set of beliefs on the interpretation of one singular verse. Oftentimes, an obscure, hard-to-understand verse is the subject of such error. For reasons that differ from situation to situation, many have made this mistake. In their zeal for their perspective on one verse, they ignore a host of other verses of Scripture and the plain teaching of the Bible as a whole.

There are several different levels of this mistake. In some instances, entirely new religions or cults have been birthed because of a strange interpretation of one verse, or a collection of solitary verses. In other instances, orthodox believers have become ensnared to inferior doctrine because of a teacher’s take on a single verse. Additionally, this trap has caused some to become caught up in silly teachings regarding food customs, holidays, the names of God, and more. Whatever the case, all such errors have the same problem at their root — an individual basing an entire system of belief on one, lone verse of Scripture without due regard for the rest of Scripture.

I call this error “the One-Verse Trap.” I myself experienced its harm early in my Christian experience. As a young believer I was exposed to a denomination of evangelical Christianity that used selective verses to teach things that were contrary to the work of grace. I became dark and depressed as a Christian, thinking I needed to perform and work in order to earn more favor from God. I was released from my burden when I began to see how the verses I was being taught weren’t being appropriately connected to other important passages of Scripture.

There is an old saying concerning Bible study that contains a lot of truth — “Anyone can make the Bible say anything they want it to say.” On the basis of Bible

verses, wars have been waged, slavery has been enacted, and child abuse has occurred. Indeed, the Bible has often been used to justify sin and sinister agendas. Oftentimes, “the One-Verse Trap” has been behind such evil.

Is there a solution to these things? What can hungry students of the Bible do to protect their times of self-feeding from such error? For years, many have regarded what is known as “the analogy of faith” as a helpful solution. One has defined the concept as “The Protestant principle that individual doctrines are to be understood in the light of the whole understanding of Christian faith, that obscure passages of Scripture are to be understood in light of clearer portions, and the Old Testament in light of the New Testament.”<sup>15</sup> There is another way of stating the analogy of faith that is perhaps simpler to understand. Plainly stated, the analogy of faith says, “The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible.” Each individual passage of the Bible must be understood in the light of the Bible as a whole.

In the title “Analogy of Faith,” the word “analogy” speaks of a comparison. The word “faith” is not used in the subjective sense, referring to trust in God. Instead, it is used in the objective sense, referring to the body of Christian beliefs and practices. See Jude 1:3 for such a use of the word “faith.” The title “Analogy of Faith” tells us that all interpretations should be compared to the overall body of Christian “faith” or truth.

We see precedent for such an approach to understanding truth in the pages of the Bible. When Paul wrote to the Romans, he said, “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). Perhaps Paul also espoused something similar to the analogy of faith when he wrote about “interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). Whatever the case, prudence is needed in this regard. To be healthy self-feeders, we must be on guard against the One-Verse Trap and learn to compare Scripture to Scripture as we study.

## **THE LAW AND GOSPEL TRAP**

While there are many interpretative traps we could talk about, one more is worth considering. In conclusion, let’s talk about what I would call “the Law and Gospel Trap.” As you approach the Bible, you must understand the distinction between God’s Law and the gospel. Both serve a critical role in God’s dealings with humanity, God’s plan of salvation, and the storyline of Scripture. The Law reflects God’s holy character, and it exposes humanity’s sin (Revelation 7:7-8). The gospel is the means by which human lawbreakers can be made right with God and have the law fulfilled in their lives.

Many believers make errors because of mistakes in regard to these things. One has noted how important an understanding of the Law and the gospel is to our understanding of Scripture: “...we must point out that the entire Scripture of God is divided into two parts: commandments and promises... [The commandments] are intended to teach man to know himself. That through them he may recognize his

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<sup>15</sup> McKim, 10.

inability to do good, and may despair of his own ability.”<sup>16</sup> The “commandments” referenced in that quote are God’s Law. The “promises” are the gospel.

Two main mistakes are often made in regard to Law and gospel. Some fall into legalism, regarding God’s Law as something one must keep through the power of the flesh. They often imagine that their law-keeping behavior earns them favor with God. The second mistake is that of antinomianism. It involves a denial of the place of God’s Law in the life of the Christian. Those who fall into this second trap are “against” (“anti”) the “law” (νόμος was the Greek word for law). They envision that the gospel erases all realities related to the Law. They fail to see that the gospel is meant to provide forgiveness of sin and to enable us to obey God’s Law. It is worth noting that Jesus affirmed the place of the Law in a believer’s life in his most important teachings (Matthew 5:17-48; 22:37-40).

Concerning the struggle to differentiate between Law and gospel, one has said, “Confusion about preaching both the law and the gospel is not confined to recent times. Since the Reformation Christians have struggled to express the biblical relationship between the law and the gospel.”<sup>17</sup> What can we do in our self-feeding to guard against errors in this matter? First, it is important that we affirm the realities of both Law and gospel. Second, it is important that we understand the role of both. Studies in basic theology or doctrinal books will help. Also, consulting good, conservative, and evangelical commentaries can be of benefit as well.

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Which one of the traps we talked about is the toughest for you to avoid? With which one do you tend to have the most confusion?
2. Can you think of a time in which you made an error in regard to one of the traps we discussed?
3. Have you heard a preacher or teacher make an error in regard to one of the traps we discussed?
4. What actions might you take to avoid some of the traps we talked about?

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<sup>16</sup> Nichols, 211.

<sup>17</sup> Richwine, E. Thomas. *You Must Read*. (Edinburgh, UK: the Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 20.