

# Lesson Nine: Rules of Interpretation - I

1. **Every passage has but one meaning.** Exceptions to this rule exist but they in no way contradict it. Prophecies were given that had immediate meanings as well as remote meanings.
2. **The simplest, most obvious meaning of any passage is usually the correct one.** One should look for the most natural interpretation of a text unless otherwise indicated. If a passage has more than one interpretation, the simplest one is most apt to be what the Lord intended.
3. **Always allow an author's own explanation of a passage to stand.** A person has the right to explain the way in which he is using an expression. The author surely knows what he means better than anyone else does.
4. **Always interpret a passage in harmony with the context.** Context is the entire section of written thought in which the passage is found. It includes that which immediately precedes and follows and all parts properly connected to it. It may be a paragraph, a chapter, a large section or the entire writing. The writings of Scripture demonstrate a continuous, logical flow of thoughts and a passage should never be forcibly pulled out of this order and forced into the mold of some other thoughts. A knowledge of the context will greatly assist in the exegesis of any doubtful passage.
5. **An interpretation of a passage should always conform to the environment of the author.** The author used the conditions of life as he knew them to frame the revealed message. He drew upon the customs of his day, the opinions of his time, the circumstances surrounding his life, and the nature of his own personality. Some things to consider about the author:
  - a. Was he an inspired man?
  - b. Was he an educated man?
  - c. What religious bias or prejudice did he have?
  - d. What of the style of his message?
  - e. A writer usually condemns the evils which appear the most dangerous to him.
6. **Each passage must be interpreted in harmony with all other passages.** This is the normal law of consistency in truth. No doctrine can be true if it is opposed to any clear statement of the word of God. When there seems to be a contradiction between the meanings of passages, one or more of the interpretations must be incorrect.
7. **One passage will often explain another passage.** Another passage may shed light on an obscure passage and bring understanding. Such a practice, though, can be overdone by forcing comparisons that are not relative.
8. **A passage must be interpreted in harmony with any idioms it contains.** An idiom is "any usage or construction peculiar to a certain language, especially a form of expression or a phrase adopted by the usage of a language with a signification other than its grammatical or logical use." (Clinton Lockhart, *Principles of Interpretation*, p. 126) For example:
  - a. Repetition was used in the Hebrews' language for emphasis. (Genesis 22:17; Luke 22:14-15)
  - b. "Love...hate" denotes comparison of one being loved more than the other. (Malachi 1:2,3; Luke 14:26)
  - c. "Not...but" was an expression of comparison of importance. (1 Peter 3:3-4; Hebrews 10:25)

9. **All passages on any given subject must be studied.** No one should ever draw a general conclusion on any Bible subject until all passages concerning it have been collected, considered, and compared. Only the sum total of passages on a given subject will give complete understanding.
10. **Observe the proper balance of Scriptural truth.** Some passages have been exaggerated or overemphasized while others have been slighted. One must be sure to balance the truth as God wills it.
11. **Let plain passages determine difficult passages.** Some passages are difficult to understand. (2 Peter 3:15-16) Always choose the meaning of an obscure or difficult passage that harmonizes with the plainer or easier passages on the same subject.

## Questions for Review and Discussion

1. If it is true that every passage has but one meaning, how do you explain prophecies which had both immediate and remote meanings?
2. Why should the author's explanation of a passage always be accepted?
3. What is context? What bearing does it have on interpretation of Scripture?
4. What things must one take into consideration about the author of a passage which have bearing on the meaning of his writing?
5. What is the "law of consistency" in truth? How does it apply to the interpretation of Scripture?
6. What is an idiom? Cite some examples of idioms found in Scripture.
7. Why must all passages on a given subject be considered before one can have a complete understanding of the subject contained in that passage?
8. What is meant by the term "balance of Scripture?"