Let God Be True: Scripture Interpreting Scripture — The Short Version

Introductory Paper in a 12 Part Series

by Escape the Mustard Tree

A plain-language companion to the Introductory Paper. Everything here is worked out at length there, with the Greek, the objections, and the sources.

A question you have probably never been asked

Picture this. You are reading your Bible one evening. You come to a passage, and you slow down, and you read it three or four times. You look up two other places that say something about the same thing. And when you set the book down, you are convinced that passage means something different from what your church teaches about it.

Underneath an evening like that sits a question, and it is one most Christians are never asked: who has the final word on what Scripture means?

That is what this paper is about. Not any single doctrine. The thing that comes before all of them.

There is a reason the question rarely gets said out loud. In a great deal of Christianity it has already been answered for you, quietly, long before you sat down with your Bible. Some churches say so openly: there is an official body whose job is to decide what Scripture means, and when your reading and their teaching disagree, your reading is the part that gives way. Other churches do not say it out loud. They say the Bible is the final authority — and then a member who reads carefully and reaches a different conclusion, and says so, finds out how much room there really was.

This project answers the question the other way. The text means what it means. It is available to any Christian who will read the whole of it, compare it with itself, and take the time.

The rest of the papers in this series make specific claims — about salvation, about the coming kingdom, about Israel and the Church. Not one of those claims is made here. They all depend on this one first, because if an outside authority gets the final word on what Scripture means, there is no point arguing about any of them from the text.

Let God be true

The title comes from Paul, and it fits in one line:

> "For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar." (Rom. 3:3-4)

Paul was writing about something else — Israel's unbelief — but the rule he states is a general one. When what God said and what men concluded do not match, God's word is the fixed point.

Everything else moves. Every creed. Every commentary. Every sermon you have ever heard. Every paper in this series, this one included.

Truth comes a little at a time

There is a verse in Isaiah that describes how God teaches, and it is the verse this whole method rests on:

> "For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little." (Isa. 28:10)

That is not a description of a lecture. It is a description of building. A piece here, a piece there, and only after a while do the pieces make a shape.

Three verses later, God says the same words about His own word:

> "But the word of the LORD was to them, 'Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.'" (Isa. 28:13)

So this is God's own account of His method. And it has a consequence that matters more than it sounds like at first: **no single verse carries a doctrine by itself.** If a teaching stands on one verse, and that verse has to be read a certain way for the teaching to work, and nothing else in the sixty-six books backs it up, then the teaching is built wrong. It does not matter how many people hold it or how long they have held it.

Notice also who Isaiah says gets taught. Not the trained men. The verses immediately before this one are about priests and prophets who were drunk on the job and could not think straight (Isa. 28:7-8). The ones left over are ordinary people — described as babies barely off milk. Whatever else that passage does, it sets the credentialed men aside.

This is not because God is careless with truth. It is because He hides things on purpose and honors the ones who go looking: "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, but the glory of kings is to search out a matter" (Prov. 25:2).

The Bible does this to itself

You could answer everything so far with a shrug. *That is your preferred way of reading.* So here it is, shown as the Bible's own way, done in the text, by Jesus and by the apostles.

Jesus answers a Bible verse with a Bible verse. In the wilderness, Satan quotes Psalm 91 to Him — and quotes it correctly. The words are right. The use of them is wrong. Jesus does not answer by saying who He is. He does not pull rank. He says, "It is written again," and He quotes a second passage (Matt. 4:7).

Read that again. A verse quoted correctly and used wrongly, corrected by another verse. That is exactly the method this paper is describing, performed by Jesus Himself, against the most skilled misuser of Scripture there has ever been.

Ordinary people are praised for checking an apostle. Paul preached in a synagogue in Berea, and the people there went home and looked it up:

> "These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so." (Acts 17:11)

Nobody there held an office. Nobody was ordained. They audited an apostle against the text — and Luke does not merely allow it. He calls them *better* than the people who did not. If Paul's preaching could be checked that way by ordinary people, nothing written since is exempt.

Scripture says it is enough. Paul told Timothy that Scripture equips a man "that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). *Complete.* If something else were needed to complete him, Paul picked the wrong word.

Who is actually teaching you

Behind all of this is one claim, and it is the reason none of it is arrogant.

The Christian's teacher is the Holy Spirit. Paul says Christians have received "the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:12). Jesus said the Spirit of truth would "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

If God gave His own Spirit to every Christian to make understanding possible, then no additional human authority is required to make it work. A teacher can help. A teacher cannot be the thing that makes it possible, because that job is already taken.

Nine rules for reading

Here is the method, put to work. These are not offered as the only nine possible rules, and where one of them rests on observation rather than something Scripture says about itself, that is noted.

1. **Read the Bible in the order it was given, Genesis to Revelation.** What is set down first governs what comes later. God describes Himself as working this way: "declaring the end from the beginning" (Isa. 46:10).
2. **Take meaning out of the text. Do not bring meaning to it.** A passage cannot mean something today that its writer never meant for the people he wrote it to. Paul calls this "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).
3. **Scripture explains Scripture, and is its own best commentary.** Everything else depends on this one. What men write about the Bible comes second. You do not need a degree. Paul describes his own method as "comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13).
4. **Every word is inspired, so every word means something.** This is why a careful word-for-word translation is worth more than a paraphrase. Jesus said man lives "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).
5. **A passage can carry more than one true meaning at the same time.** Paul reads Hagar and Sarah as two covenants while the history stays exactly as written (Gal. 4:22-24).

6. **The Bible is full of pictures — earlier people and events standing for later ones.** Jesus said the bronze serpent Moses lifted up pictured His own lifting up (John 3:14-15).
7. **The Bible is one story, and Jesus is its subject.** He said so to men who had the Old Testament memorized: "You search the Scriptures... and these are they which testify of Me" (John 5:39).
8. **Take the plain sense first, unless the text itself tells you otherwise.** And it does tell you. John says "temple" meant Jesus' body (John 2:21). Jesus explains the parable of the sower Himself (Matt. 13:18-23). You are not left guessing where the pictures are.
9. **The first time a word or idea appears tends to set its pattern.** This one is something readers have noticed, not something Scripture claims about itself. Treat it as a good place to start looking, not as proof of anything by itself.

Two things you can check yourself

Method talk is cheap until you watch it do something. Here are two small cases where the thing carrying the weight is not the Bible, but a decision somebody made about the Bible.

The comma nobody wrote

Jesus says this to the thief on the cross, in nearly every English Bible you can buy:

> "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43)

Read that way, He promises Paradise that same day.

But the Greek manuscripts have no punctuation in them at all. None. The comma is a translator's decision. Move it one word to the right — "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise" — and Jesus is saying something *on that day* about a future He has not dated.

Both readings come out of the same Greek. Not one letter changes.

There are arguments on both sides and this paper is not going to pick the convenient one. Against the later comma: "assuredly, I say to you" shows up dozens of times in the Gospels and is never followed by "today" anywhere else. In its favor: "I command you today" is an ordinary Hebrew way of speaking, all through Deuteronomy, so the phrasing is hardly strange.

The point does not depend on which side wins, and it is stronger for that. **The question is open, and nothing but a printing habit has been closing it.** A reader who has never seen the other option has not weighed anything and chosen. He inherited a typesetting decision and took it for the words of Jesus.

Four words, one English word

The second one is not disputed by anybody. You can settle it with a dictionary.

Open an English Bible to the word "hell." In the King James Version, that one word is doing the work of three different Greek words and one Hebrew word.

Hades is the unseen place of the dead. It is where the rich man is in Luke 16:23 — and it is where Jesus' own soul was, which Peter says outright: "You will not leave my soul in Hades" (Acts 2:27).

Gehenna is something else entirely: the Valley of Hinnom, a real place outside Jerusalem with a grim history. *Tartaroō* appears exactly once, about angels who sinned (2 Pet. 2:4). And the Old Testament word behind most of it is *Sheol*, which the same translation renders "hell" in one place, "the grave" in another, and "the pit" in a third.

Four distinct words. One English word.

Now think about what follows from that. Any teaching built on the English word "hell" is built on a category the Greek does not have. And here is the part that should stop you: the man who built that teaching never made a mistake. He read his Bible carefully and he trusted it. The mistake was already there before he opened it.

That is the whole reason this paper exists.

A wrinkle in our own verse

One more, and it is close to home.

Isaiah 28:9, the verse right before the one this method rests on, gets punctuated two different ways. The King James reads the last part as an answer: God teaches "them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts." The New King James reads all of it as questions: "Those just weaned from milk? Those just drawn from the breasts?"

The Hebrew has neither. No question marks, no period, no punctuation of any kind. Both are translators' decisions — exactly like the comma in Luke 23.

A paper saying that inherited punctuation is not Scripture cannot make an exception for its own favorite verse, so there it is, stated out loud. And it costs nothing. Read either way, the drunken priests are being set aside and the unlearned are the ones left. And the phrase itself does not depend on the punctuation at all, because three verses later God puts it in His own mouth (Isa. 28:13).

Where those decisions come from

The comma and the word "hell" can look like accidents. Some are not.

The King James Version was made under instructions from King James I, and there were fifteen of them. Rule 3 required the translators to keep "the old ecclesiastical words," and it named one specifically: "church." Tyndale had translated that Greek word as "congregation," and so had the Geneva Bible.

The difference was not accuracy. "Congregation" means a gathering of people. "Church" had come to mean an institution with officers. One of those words quietly supports a structure with bishops at the top of it, and the king was at the top of that structure. The instruction preserved the reading that helped.

None of that makes the King James Version untrustworthy. It is careful work and it has served English-speaking Christians for four hundred years. The point is narrower, and it applies to every translation ever made: **a translation is a series of decisions made by men, and a few of those**

decisions were made for reasons that had nothing to do with the Greek or the Hebrew. The reader who says "I just read the Bible" is always reading somebody's decisions. The only question is whether he knows it.

Three fair questions

"Then why do Christians disagree so much?"

This is the strongest thing anyone says against this position, and the disagreement is real. Count the denominations.

But look at what was actually promised. Isaiah did not describe truth arriving all at once — precept upon precept, line upon line, here a little, there a little is a description of work spread out over time. Hebrews rebukes readers who should be teaching by now and still need milk, and says solid food belongs to those "who by reason of use have their senses exercised" (Heb. 5:12-14). Exercised. Used. Nothing about that describes a book that gives itself up on a first casual reading.

Scripture admits the difficulty outright, and what it does about it is the most useful thing in this whole discussion. Peter says some of what Paul wrote is hard to understand, and that unstable people twist it. Then he gives his remedy — and it is not an official interpreter. He tells his readers to grow (2 Pet. 3:16-18). The problem is being untaught. The answer is to stop being untaught.

What this method promises is not that everyone will agree. It promises that every claim can be checked, by anyone, against the same book. That is worth more than it sounds. Under the other arrangement, a disputed teaching gets settled by whoever has the authority to settle it, and an ordinary Christian's recourse ends there. Under this one it never ends, because the standard is a text anyone can open.

Disagreement does not prove there is no answer. Doctors disagree about a diagnosis. Nobody concludes the patient has nothing wrong with him.

"Doesn't the Bible say I am not allowed to interpret it?"

This is the verse people usually mean:

> "knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." (2 Pet. 1:20-21)

Read the second half. Peter explains himself, and his explanation is not about readers at all. Watch the word *for*: no prophecy is of private interpretation **because** prophecy never came by the will of man. He is talking about where Scripture came from. The prophets did not make it up out of their own heads; they spoke as the Spirit carried them along.

That is a verse about how the Bible was written. It is not a verse about who is allowed to read it. Peter's own next sentence says so.

"So I do not need teachers?"

You do, and this position should not be defended by pretending otherwise.

God gave teachers to the Church deliberately: "He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry" (Eph. 4:11-12). Look at the word *equipping*. A teacher's job is to hand you the tools and step aside — not to stand between you and the text.

There is a picture of this in Acts. An Ethiopian official is reading Isaiah in his chariot and cannot make sense of it, and Philip asks if he understands. The man says, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:31). That sounds like the end of the argument until you keep reading. Philip holds no teaching office at all — he was one of seven men appointed to serve tables. And what he does is described exactly: "beginning at this Scripture, [he] preached Jesus to him" (Acts 8:35). He explains Isaiah out of the rest of Scripture. Then the man is baptized, Philip is gone, and the Ethiopian "went on his way rejoicing" (Acts 8:39). No ongoing supervision. No institution anywhere in the account.

That is the model. Teachers who open the text and hand it over.

What this changes

If this is right, two things follow, and the second one is the harder of the two.

First, you are permitted. The Bible was not written to be handled only by trained men. It was given to you, and the Spirit who inspired it lives in you, and you are allowed to open it and find out what it says.

Second, you are responsible. Once you know that some of what you believe came to you through somebody's decisions rather than out of the text, "that is what I was taught" stops being an answer. The Bereans went home and looked it up. That was the part Luke praised.

Everything in the twelve papers that follow is offered on those terms. Not one of them asks to be believed because of who wrote it. Every claim in them cites the passages it comes from, so that you can go check whether it holds — and throw it out if it does not.

Let God be true, and every man a liar.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version.