



# The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

---

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net  
Email: info@austin-sparks.net

*In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.*

---

## Five Principles of Interpreting the Bible

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*Excerpt from Chapter 1 of "The Persistent Purpose of God" transcribed from conference messages given in Taiwan in January 1957.*

It is very important for us to be able to know how the Bible is to be interpreted, and this will be especially seen in what we have to consider later on. Unless we do understand these principles of the interpretation of the Bible, the Bible is not an open book; we may know what is in the Book as a book, but we do not understand it until we have the principles of interpretation. So I ask you to try and remember what I am going to say now and bring it over into our later study.

The first principle of the interpretation of the Bible is:

### **1. The Eternity of God.**

We must always remember that all time is present time with God. There is no past and future with God; all that is past and future with us has been present with God always. At any moment in what is time to us, eternity is present with God.

The architect always has the completed plan before him. If he is the designer of a ship, he has a model made of that ship before anything is done. He sees in the model the completed object, that is exactly how the thing will appear when it is finished. If it is a great building, or even a city, it is the same. The architect draws what we call "a scale model", and he sees in that model exactly how the building, or the city, will be when it is finished. The builder works day by day according to that

completed plan. Those who only see the parts cannot understand, and must not take the parts as being the whole. Sometimes when you look at the parts of a building, you cannot for the life of you understand what it is going to be. It is only as the completed thing is seen that you can understand the parts.

Now, the Bible is just full of parts, but they are all the parts of something that God sees in completion. God is the Great Architect, He has the completed and perfect plan before Him before He begins any work. God's eternity is in every part. So we must realise that God has His *full* Mind behind everything that He does! God's *full* intention governs everything that He does! You must realise that God's Mind never grows - God Himself is incapable of development.

Now, I think I would like to say at this point, if you do not understand anything that I say, and would like something more said about it, just put up your hand. I do not want to just go on and leave you not understanding what I'm saying. You will have an opportunity in the second session tomorrow to ask questions, but I do want to be sure that as we go on you know what I'm talking about. So if you would like anything repeated, just put up your hand, and I'll say it again. Now we continue.

The temporary form of anything contains the *eternal and full thought of God*. You must realise that there are always *two meanings* in anything that is in the Bible: there is the present meaning, that is, how that applies to the present situation; but there is also the future meaning. Everything in the Bible, while it has a present application, has a fuller meaning in the future. That is the first law of interpretation, it is: the eternity of God.

The second law of interpretation is:

## **2. The Comprehensiveness of Christ.**

Christ is the interpretation of all the Bible. To know Christ, is to understand the Bible. Men like Peter and Paul knew the Bible, but they did not understand it until they knew the Lord Jesus. We first know the Lord Jesus, and then we take Him back into the Bible, and He is the interpretation of the Bible. Therefore, we cannot really understand the Bible until we know the Lord Jesus. That results in this: that the Bible is really a *Person*, and not a book. The Bible is a Living Person, and not a dead letter. Because this Person is inexhaustible, He makes the Bible inexhaustible.

Now, that is a more important principle than perhaps you realise. It is possible to exhaust the Bible as a book. We have known great Bible teachers who went through the Bible, teaching it again and again, but at the end of their lives they were having difficulty in finding something fresh and they were only repeating again and again things that they had said in past years. That is because they dealt with the Bible as a book. That will never happen if you know the Lord Jesus and see the Bible in Him, and Him in the Bible. I repeat that the Lord Jesus can never be exhausted. As the Holy Spirit reveals the Lord Jesus to us, the Bible is always more alive.

So, we have our first two principles of interpretation: 1, The Eternity of God; 2, The Comprehensiveness of Christ. Now we come to number:

## **3. The Interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit.**

I have said that Jesus is the interpretation of the Bible. I am saying now that the Holy Spirit is the *Interpreter* of the Bible.

We are familiar with the words in the letter to the Corinthians, but I think we might just look at them again now. In the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter two and verse thirteen: "Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth, combining spiritual things with spiritual words." Now, I don't know whether you have marginal references in your Bible, well, the more correct translation of those words is this: "interpreting spiritual things to spiritual men." Let us read the whole passage again in that way: "Which things also we speak, not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Spirit teacheth, interpreting spiritual things to spiritual men". Well, that's a very important statement and it definitely affirms the principle that we are now setting forth: the interpreter of the Bible is the Holy Spirit.

First of all then, the Bible is the Holy Spirit's Book. The Bible is not firstly man's book, it is not *our* book, we have not got the book. We have got certain writings which are called "Scriptures", but in truth we do not possess the Book.

You remember the case of the Ethiopian eunuch, when Philip came near to his chariot, he heard him reading. He was reading the book at Isaiah 53. Philip said to him, "Understandest thou what thou readeest?" and he said, "How can I, except someone explains?" Well, here is a man who had the book in a certain sense, but in a *real* and *profitable* sense he did not possess the book. We can have the book as a volume, and yet we may not possess the book because the Bible is the Holy Spirit's book first. The mind of man and the Mind of the Spirit are two altogether different things!

Do you know, there are many, many Christians who do not recognise that! There are many Bible teachers who do not recognise that! And this is the cause of very much confusion and the reason for very much spiritual smallness and weakness. I think this may lie at the bottom of most of the controversies. *The Bible is a closed book to all but spiritual men.* This is the principle that the Lord Jesus set before Nicodemus: You must be born from above before you can see what is above.

Our measure of understanding of the Bible will be just in accordance with the measure of our spiritual life. That is why the Lord takes us through experiences in order to bring us to understanding. The measure of our death to the natural mind will be the measure of our understanding of the things of the Spirit. Please remember that in these days which are before us - something has got to happen *in us* before we understand the Scriptures. We cannot understand the Word of God by just deciding that we are going to have a training course, we are going to have some classes for Bible teaching. That is *not* the way in which we come to understanding of the Word of God. We shall *only* understand according to the measure of our spiritual life. That is the third principle of Biblical interpretation.

Now number:

#### **4. The Final Mention of Any Particular Matter in the Bible is Usually the Key to All Its Meaning.**

That is something that you must just think about. We find certain things mentioned again and again in the Bible, but when we come to the *final* occasion where that thing is mentioned, we usually find the key to *all* that has been said about that matter before. If you take a particular matter where it is mentioned for the last time, and then note the setting, and the context, and the relationship, you will

get the *full* meaning of all that has been said about that before. Now, that is a statement that I have made, and you need to work on that, but I will help you by taking just one illustration.

In the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22 and verse 2, we have the last reference to the tree of Life. Now, when we go right back to the beginning of the Bible, we have the tree of Life mentioned, but we are told nothing about it - it is just referred to as something that exists. We have no explanation, we are not told what that tree is, or what it means; it is just referred to as: "the tree of Life." We have to go to the end of the Bible for the explanation, and when we come to this last chapter of the Bible, by the context and relationship, we have a very large explanation.

Supposing we look at the passage. Revelation 22: "And He showed me a river of water of Life, bright as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb." Note the context: "the throne of God and of the Lamb". You've got to read the whole book of the Revelation to understand that! There's a tremendous amount in the early chapters of this book about "the throne of God and of the Lamb". And you have to understand what the throne of God is and what is the significance of the throne of the Lamb - in the midst of the throne is a Lamb!

Now, in relation to "the throne of God and of the Lamb," there is "the river of the water of Life... in the midst of the street thereof. And on this side of the river and on that side was the tree of Life, bearing twelve manner of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no curse any more; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be therein and His servants shall serve Him." There is the tree of Life. It bears immortal fruit, there is no place for death here. Its fruit are borne every month: this is fruit immortal, or fruit without death.

The *leaves* of this tree are for the *health* of the nations. I am sorry that in most versions the word is wrongly translated. I don't know what the word is in your translation, but the original is not for the *healing* of the nations, but for the *health* of the nations. You may ask, "What is the difference?" Well, one is *the removal of disease* and the other is *the prevention of disease*.

In this chapter we have come to the time when the spiritual diseases of the nations have been healed, but the *health* of the nations needs to be preserved. It is a state that is to be maintained. So the leaves are not for healing, they are for preservation. And so it says: "And there shall be no more curse."

You see, you've got the whole history of the Bible in those words! You have got all that came on the nations through Adam's sin. You have corruption and death - moral disease - the result of a curse; all that is now cleared up. And the Tree of Life represents victory of Life over all that, *Life triumphant*, and *Life abundant*. Here the *full* meaning of the Tree of Life is revealed. And it is like that with all other matters. When you come to the *last* mention, you have the key to the whole subject. That is a principle of the interpretation of the Bible.

Now I come to the last for the present, number:

## **5. The only *Real* Value is the Spiritual.**

You *must* remember this when you are reading and studying the Bible, and you *must* keep this in mind in these times in which we are together. You must not come here just with a thirst for more

information or a craving for more knowledge. There are people who just want to get more and more knowledge and education. And I think that is a particular characteristic of the people in the far east. You will do anything to get education. You will go to the other side of the world if you can get more and better education. Now, that constitutes a danger. Of course it is better than not wanting to know anything, but there is a danger about this.

We must not come to these classes with a craving for more knowledge. That is exactly how Adam was caught. You see, Satan said: "If you take of this tree, you will know..." it was "the tree of Knowledge." And there is always a danger in eating of that tree, it might just lead you into death and not into Life. So, I repeat this principle of Biblical interpretation: *the only real value is the spiritual*. And spiritual value is just how it affects our life with God! I do wish that Adam had recognised that when Satan tempted him to take of the tree of Knowledge. If only Adam had said, "How will this affect my life with God?" he, and we, should have been saved all the trouble.

So, let me say this again: *spiritual* value is just in how it affects our life with God. Shall I put that in another way - just how much it increases the measure of Christ. If Christ is the interpretation of the Bible, the spiritual knowledge of the Bible results in an increase of Christ. If our days together now do not result in an increase of the measure of Christ, we have missed the Way. You may go away in two weeks time with your notebooks very full, and you may have an idea that you have got a lot more knowledge, but if we do not go away more Christ-like men and women, with a larger measure of the Lord Jesus, this training course has failed. So I beg of you to pray all the way through that this time together may mean *spiritual increase*, not intellectual enlargement, but *spiritual* knowledge.

Everything has got to be judged by how much it contributes to the Ultimate Purpose of God. We have to ask, "Where does this lead us to? *Is it* leading us anywhere? What is it leading us to?" All spiritual knowledge leads to an increase of Christ; it contributes to the ultimate Purpose of God. The question *always* is: "How much of *Life* is there in it?" It is not a matter of interest. It is not. The real value is the spiritual.