

Reading God's Word

A Gentle Admonition

by [Charles Coty](#)



A wonderful gentleman by the name of [Ed Ferner](#) once gave me some simple but sage advice that I will pass along. "[The Scripture was written FOR us but it was not written TO us.](#)" As obvious as that sounds it has made the Scriptures alive for me in ways that I never would have dreamed. I found that it is imperative to view Scripture through the eyes of those that it was written to and it's helpful to read the Scripture with the full knowledge that *we are reading someone else's mail*. If we are faithful in this regard, we will, through the power of the Holy Spirit who resides within, unlock truths in God's word that have escaped us & so many countless others for generations. **Bold** you say? Yes. **Arrogant**? I don't think so. **Possible**? Absolutely!

I always assumed that the early church fathers who we revere so much had each been given a special key into the mysteries of God. In my opinion this mediator-type system's vestiges had their beginnings in a state controlled church where the Word was not entrusted to the "masses". Now more than ever we have the tools available to study God's word that even the elite scholars of the 3rd century simply didn't have.

We have access to the entire Bible in 40 translations from Arabic to Russian at the stroke of a mouse click. We can search the Scripture for every usage of "[The kingdom of God](#)" in less than a second. We can scan through the exhaustive writings of [Josephus](#) in the blink of an eye. And we can no longer be confused by the Scofield's of this world if they tweak their notes by misinterpreting the Greek.

For example [Scofield](#) attempted to use the Greek word *genos* as "[generation](#)" in [Matthew 24:34](#). An oversight we hope but if used properly as *genea* this would have been a huge nail in the coffin of his [dispensational system](#). Jesus said, "[Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.](#) *Genos* (1085 Strong's Greek) means offspring, stock, kin or a people. The correct word, *Genea* (1074 Strong's Greek), means an age, generation or time. As you can see the meaning of the verse changes drastically with this small error and we no longer are held captive to these kinds of mistakes be they intentional or accidental.

Although we have the technological advantages over the early church fathers, we lack something that we must make up for. And that's proximity to the source. They had an understanding of the times & culture associated with the writers of the Scripture that we lack. Our westernized mind is a huge stumbling block to proper interpretation. Therefore, we must go back to our spiritual roots for it is only through a study of the historical setting that we can begin to grasp the [Word](#) in context.

If we extract the contents of Paul's letter to the Galatians or John's Revelation to the expectant believers, & put those words into a 21st century context, we will not ascertain the full meaning of

what these writers were attempting to share with their readers. [Audience relevance](#) is absolutely critical.

In [Acts chapter 2 verses 16-21](#), what was Peter's explanation to those present at the Day of Pentecost regarding the supernatural abilities of the unschooled Galileans (who were speaking in the many languages of those present)? Peter begins to quote Joel, "[in the last days...](#)" and then proceeds to give a list of things that would happen in the [time of the end](#).

Most of us extract those words "last days" & transport them in a time machine 2,000 years future into the year 2006 and we assume that we are living in the "last days". Is this what the passage says? Only if we forget the Biblical [hermeneutic](#) of audience relevance.

Therefore, it is imperative that we put on our *1st century glasses* when we read the words of the apostles. Without a working knowledge of the times, customs & settings we will never uncover the truth & we will continue to be frustrated with an inability to make sense of God's word. And this will ultimately result in apathy regarding our zeal to read His word.

A good friend, [Pastor James Saxon](#), used to say time & again, "we must interpret the unclear in the light of that which is clear." When the Scripture uses terms like, [at hand](#), [shortly](#), [soon](#), [a very little while](#), it is imperative that we don't assign an arbitrary vagueness to these words of imminency. That will do great damage to the context of these passages of God's holy inspired word.

When reading these time sensitive statements we must not allow our minds to become clouded and misapply a verse such as [2Pet 2:3](#), "[With the Lord a day is like a thousand years](#)". We must be intellectually honest & we must be consistent. For when Jesus says, "[I shall be with you a little while longer, and then I go to Him who sent Me](#)" is he not referring to a short time period? Then when we read in Hebrews, "[For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry](#)", do we change the meaning of "[a little while](#)" to fit our long held presuppositions? If we don't consistently apply word meanings then we can make Scripture say whatever works in our own eyes. At the least this becomes mighty treacherous interpretational territory which I think we clearly should avoid.

Approximately 500 years before fulfillment Daniel was told to "[seal up the vision](#)" for it was yet "[many days in the future](#)" at the "[time of the end](#)". Yet in John's Revelation he was told, "[do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near](#)". How can we be intellectually honest & ascribe Daniel's sealed vision "many days in the future" to 500+ years & "the time is near" of the unsealed Revelation to 2,000 years? How can we be intellectually honest & ascribe Daniel's sealed vision "**many days in the future**" to **500+ years** & "**the time is near**" of John's unsealed Revelation to almost **2,000 years** & counting? We would never consider performing this exercise in mental gymnastics with any other form of literature but when it comes to the inspired inerrant Word of our Creator we seem to discard reason. Why? Could it possibly be due the expectations of our paradigm being so powerful as to not allow us the freedom to question theological tradition?

Put yourself in the place of the disciples when Jesus said, "[then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains](#)" or "[Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom.](#)" Do you think the hearers of those words took Jesus seriously? At the very least, do we not find it rather disingenuous & downright misleading to utter these types of time indicators if in fact they are actually coded so that only

someone 2,000 years future can decipher them? (In my opinion, treating the Scriptures in this manner lends credibility & acceptance to blasphemous books like the [Da Vinci Code](#).)

Would we not be put-off by being told to "[flee to the mountains](#)", scaring us half out of our minds, if this admonition is meant for a generation thousands of years hence? Can we trust Jesus for our salvation if we cannot rely on Him to do the things he said he would do in the time He said he would do them? [C.S. Lewis](#) apparently didn't have a problem with this when he wrote,

"Say what you like," we shall be told, "the apocalyptic beliefs of the first Christians have been proved to be false. It is clear from the New Testament that they all expected the Second Coming in their own lifetime. And, worse still, they had a reason, and one which you will find very embarrassing. Their Master had told them so. He shared, and indeed created, their delusion. He said in so many words, 'this generation shall not pass till all these things be done.' And he was wrong. He clearly knew no more about the end of the world than anyone else."

C.S. Lewis was being honest & for that he should be commended but it is quite sad that even this great stalwart of the faith had no hermeneutical grid with which to effectively understand these passages.

We have a theological system that can effectively answer the tough questions that C.S. Lewis was not able to deal with. In fact we can make sense of 2nd Testament's statements of imminence while increasing our reverence for the inspired Word. We can know that Jesus meant what he said and fulfilled his predictions in the exact time sequences that they were stated. We don't have to *hide* from the atheistic, Judaistic, or Islamic websites & proselytizers as they incessantly trot out Jesus' Words per [Matthew 24:34](#), [Matthew 10:23](#), and [Matthew 16:27-28](#).

However, it is imperative that we set our presuppositions aside and be open to what the Scripture teaches us regardless of implications. For most of us a *paradigm shift* is in order—that process can entail periods of uneasiness & uncertainty. For a season every answered question may find two taking its place. But I can attest that there is a light at the end of the tunnel—it's Jesus in all His revealed glory!

A type of Biblical language that seems to create a great deal of confusion & consternation is the recurrent use of figurative speech. In order for us to begin to understand God's plan throughout history we must effectively recognize [apocalyptic language](#) & metaphoric speech while allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. We see this kind of writing in Isaiah, Ezekiel, & Daniel. Upon first glance we are prone (by our westernized 21st century mindset) to take the words of Daniel 8:10 literally—"*...and some of the host and some of the stars it threw down to the ground and trampled on them.*" In [1837 Adam Clark](#) referencing the above verse wrote, "*The destruction of the Jews by Antioch Epiphanes, is represented by casting down some of the host of heaven, and the stars to the ground.*" Daniel is not speaking of the dissolution of a planet but the judgment of a nation. So when we read this same type of language in the 2nd Testament we must not change our interpretational grid.

Have you ever asked or been asked the following question... Should God's Word be taken literally or figuratively? The truth is that it must be interpreted both ways. A great obstacle that we must overcome is that our westernized mind is so far removed from the times when Peter dropped his nets into the Sea of Galilee. Surely when we read, "*For every beast of the forest is Mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills*" we realize that God isn't saying that the thousandth and

one hill is up for grabs. Or when Jesus said, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*", we don't get the picture of a supernatural construction company of angels working around the clock for 3 days building a temple more marvelous than the one that was destroyed. Did they get it? Did they think he was speaking literally? No, they didn't have a clue & yes, they interpreted His statement literally just like we oftentimes do today.

The complexity has been interjected by theologians who refuse (like first century Jews) to recognize that His coming was far different than expected. The Jews anticipated a political warrior prince who could physically vindicate them from the bondage of Roman tyranny. He was rejected because He did not meet their expectations. Instead He came as a suffering servant offering the forgiveness of sins, not as some sort of temporal respite but of eternal consequence. In [Acts 1:6](#) they still didn't get it even after the resurrection. They said, "*Lord will you at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel?*" It was never about physical earthly rule as Jesus pointed out to the woman at the well in [John 4](#). Jesus said, "*Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father....²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him.²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.*"

That's why they missed Him the first time. Their physical expectations didn't meet God's spiritual intentions. Have we repeated the same mistake a 2nd time? (*I thought a little repetitive redundancy was in order*)

Many warn us against "spiritualizing" too many texts but don't think it doesn't happen often in all forms of eschatological systems. Those that claim to be literalists have equated the locusts mentioned in Revelation 9 to Cobra helicopters. ***So he who is without figurative language cast the first stone of [heresy](#).*** It is quite obvious that all Scripture cannot be taken literally. So the question shouldn't be *whether* to use a consistent literal or figurative hermeneutic—it should be a question of *when*.

For example: When we read "*All the stars of the heavens will be dissolved and the sky rolled up like a scroll; all the starry host will fall like withered leaves from the vine, like shriveled figs from the fig tree*", how do we interpret these words? In our 21st century mindset most of us think that this is a prediction of the destruction of the earth at the end of time. Let's take a closer look. This prophecy was uttered by [Isaiah in chapter 34 verse 4](#) and is clearly announcing the desolation of Bozrah the capital of Edom late in the sixth century BC. This is judgment language & it's quite clear that it can't be taken literally since we're at our computer right now.

So when we come to passages with similar language in the New Testament like that of [Acts 2:16-21](#), [Matt 24:29](#), [2Pet 3:10-12](#), or [Rev 6:12-14](#) are we going to be consistent in our interpretation? How do you think the people living in the first century viewed this type of language? Lest we forget—it's certainly worth noting that no one had the benefit of a pocket New Testament tucked neatly in their tunic pocket or resting prominently on their nightstand. The first century Christians had only the 1st Testament. Peter, James, Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John were not in the business of creating a new religion. They weren't redefining terms.

Let's look at Caiaphas' response to Jesus' declaration that, "*hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven*". It says, "*He has spoken blasphemy*"! It's quite evident that [Caiaphas](#) fully understood this type of apocalyptic language of "coming on the clouds". Only God came on the clouds! This is referenced repeatedly in the 1st Testament—*The oracle concerning Egypt; Behold, the LORD is riding on a*

swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; The idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them” Isa 19:1

And let's not let the word “**you**” in Matthew 26 escape our notice. Jesus said, “**YOU** will see...” as he was speaking directly to Caiaphas. Nothing like dropping a bombshell on our eschatological paradigm!

The Word of God is the unfolding of the ***Greatest Story Ever Told*** and we do it great disservice by compartmentalizing its contents as though we are reading hundreds of different unrelated stories. We separate the Old & New Testament like it was some sort of God-ordained division when in fact we can see Christ clearly on page after page of the Old Testament.

The plan of redemption is clear from ***Genesis to Revelation***. God has always been sovereign & his plans were not & can not be thwarted. His plan has been unfolding throughout history with the precision of a Swiss watchmaker. It has always been by faith & never by our own effort that has given us acceptance before a perfect & holy God.

The New Covenant didn't abolish the Old - it fulfilled & completed it. The Old Covenant was merely an imperfect shadow. Christ's work of redemption on the cross & His coming in judgment 40 years later in AD 70 (against a wicked & perverse generation) was the perfect fulfillment of that which had been foretold & so masterfully weaves God's new with the old when he writes, "...*“A new covenant”, He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.*” It was growing old & it did in fact vanish with the destruction of the temple & the entire sacrificial system in those horrible days of tribulation as Titus obliterated Jerusalem. Prophecy was indeed fulfilled but yet since many of us know so little about history, sadly those still waiting for a future fulfillment seem more numerous than the grains of sand in the Sahara.

Since this Old Covenant passed away, we now worship God in spirit and in truth and no longer are we constrained to meet God in boxes or buildings since we are now the temple of the Holy Spirit. For we are the New Jerusalem which comes from above & we are joint heirs with Abraham in the Kingdom of God which has come. We have not replaced Israel but become partakers in the promise. Nationality, circumcision, obedience nor any outward manifestations of our humanity would ever become a pleasing aroma in God's holy & perfect kingdom. It was by faith then & it is by faith now that we enter God's eternal peace.

God is never forced by man's rebellion to resort to alternate plan B's, C's, or D's. And it is with this backdrop that we study God's word with the confidence that through the Spirit's illumination that we can understand the mystery of God.

Our God is in complete control & He shall reign forever & ever, Amen!

So when we read the Scripture we will do well to consider the fact that although the Scripture was written for our benefit it was not written directly TO US. It was not dropped in our mailbox that day. If we do not understand a passage in the light of the original audience then we find ourselves making unintended application. Audience relevance is the key to unlocking the mysteries of the faith once hidden but made known through Christ. *“and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things;” Eph 3:9*