

Chapter 6

Rule #6: "If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense."

This rule is saying in effect: Read a passage of the Bible. Does it make sense to you the way it is written? Good, then you can take it literally and move on. Does it not make sense to you to take it literally? If not, then maybe it was meant to be taken figuratively. This rule ties in very well with Rule #3 ("All means all, and that is all, all means"). Both rules talk about the importance of taking your bible seriously. Rule #6 also includes the corollary thought of "If the plain text (of the Bible) does not make perfect sense (as it literally reads) then consider other possibilities.

There are some passages of the Bible, especially those that are poetic, that are figurative language and are not meant to be taken literally. Let me give you a famous example in the Bible on this principal:

Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer.
2From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grows faint;
lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
3For you have been my refuge,
strong tower against the foe.
4I long to dwell in your tent forever
and take refuge in the shelter of your wings.
(Psalm 61:1-4, NIV)

This is a Psalm written by King David. In this Psalm, David crying out to God. By Verse 4, David is saying he desires to "take refuge in the shelter of your (God's) wings." So the first question to ask is, "Does God have wings? Is he a big bird flying around heaven in which we all take refuge under his wings?" In this silly illustration, bible critics actually use this passage to criticize us who take our bible seriously. They say, "You take your bible literally? Well look at this passage, does your God have feathers? The answer of course, is Rule #6: "If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense". The corollary to this rule "If the plain text doesn't make sense, seek some other sense". It doesn't make sense that God has feathers. Therefore, "some other sense" must take place and this is simply a word-picture.

It does not make "plain sense" to believe the God of the Universe, the Perfect God who knows all things, created all things and is above all things has feathers. Therefore, this poem by David is using figurative language. It is designed to be a poetic word-picture to show that God cares for us the same way a mother bird protects her young under her wings. That's it. Christians are not supposed to always take their bible literally; they are supposed to take their bible seriously.

This rule is designed to fit in with the other rules we have discussed so far in this book. This is why you interpret the Bible with the Bible (Rule #5). By working your way through the Bible systemically (Rule #2) and prayerfully (Rule #1), you learn all about God and his expectations

for you and your life. Most passages of the Bible are meant to be taken literally. Some are poetic and are meant to be taken figuratively. The question then becomes, “How do we know when to take a passage literally and when to take it figuratively? The answer is Rule #6 “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense”.

Let me give you a couple of more examples to think about:

(Jesus said) “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.” (Matthew 5:29, NIV)

Does Jesus literally want you to gouge out an eye if it causes you to sin? Do we read anywhere else in the New Testament of the apostles gouging out eyes of those who sin? (The answer is no!) If Jesus was serious, why didn't he command that both eyes be gouged out? The point here is to remember Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense.” Jesus is being figurative here. Jesus' point is that God takes sin seriously and it is better to avoid it, or at least confess it to God and desire to change your ways than it is to spend eternity in hell. The “plain text” of gouging out your eye does not make “perfect sense”. Therefore, it is reasonable to see “other sense” by thinking Jesus is being figurative, and not literal.

Here is another example:

(Jesus said) “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” (John 6:54, NIV)

If you take this text literally, is Jesus endorsing cannibalism? Do we read of the resurrected Jesus telling the apostles, “Here guys, take a bite out of me”. At the risk of being both gross and blasphemous, I'm trying to make a point that not every sentence in the bible is meant to be taken literally, but every sentence is meant to be taken seriously. In the early centuries of the Christian church, there were actually false accusations made that Christians endorsed cannibalism based on scriptures like this! When Jesus commands us to take of his flesh and blood it means to accept his payment for our sins. The point is Rule #6, “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense” applies here.

This rule also teaches us the importance of considering that the text may be taken literally even if it beyond our comprehension to understand how it can happen. Let's go back to the Noah's ark story. In the story, Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives all go into the ark with all the animals (Genesis 7:1-5). A flood covers the whole earth. They are the only survivors and they repopulate the whole planet. Does the “plain text” of a flood covering the world make sense? Of course it does. We often have trouble accepting the “plain text” because for many of us, our concept of God is too small. If God is capable of creating the heavens and the earth, then he is capable of flooding the whole thing. It is God's creation, and he can do what he wants with it whether we like it or not.

A good question to ask yourself in the “literalness test” is, “If an outsider, who knew nothing about the Bible, were to read this section of the text, would they interpret it literally? If for example, this “outsider” read the Noah’s ark story, wouldn’t they say, “Well, it says here in this book, that this God fellow caused a flood to cover the whole world. Is that possible? I guess so, if He built it, he could destroy it”. I guess it is logical that it is true as it is written. The point is if you believe the first part (God created the whole world) then you can believe the second part (God destroyed the whole world). If you have doubts about the first part, you will naturally have doubts about the second. It is often our failure to grasp the power of God that we refuse to logically accept what the text is actually saying. Now ask yourself, “Is it logical for God to have feathers?” Well a perfect God would have no need of anything, therefore it is not logical that the “wings” section is literal, especially if read in context of the surrounding verses.

There are often other ways one can validate the literalness of the scripture. Questions to ponder include the idea of the “plain text” getting validated elsewhere in scripture. This is the idea behind Rule #5, which is “Interpret the Bible with the Bible”. For example, Jesus validated the story of Noah just as it took place (Matthew 24:36-37, Luke 17:26-27). If you believe Jesus is God, and you live your life in obedience to his words, you should have no problem believing the flood story. Jesus validated the Noah story as true. If you don’t believe the Noah’s ark story just as it is written, are you calling Jesus a liar or was He just misinformed? Either way, you could be in big trouble on judgment day if you happen to be a devout Christian and you believe Jesus is Lord and God.

Another way of testing the literalness of the Scripture is to see how it is applied elsewhere in the Bible. Earlier I mentioned Jesus warning about “gouging an eye” if it causes you to sin. If you read the rest of the New Testament, you never read so much as a hint that this was practiced or even considered as a possible punishment. Therefore, “Interpreting the Bible with the Bible” becomes an important principal for testing the literalness of the scripture.

Another rule of thumb, especially for prophecy is, “Did this event come to pass, or can it literally happen as the passage states? Much of Old Testament Bible prophecy is validated through history and archeology. Other predictions tie in to the second coming of Jesus. When you study the literalness of the prophecy that has already occurred, you get a strong sense of the literalness for the prophecy that will also come true. When studying predictions that haven’t come true yet, there are libraries full of predictions as to how it might come true. Until it literally happens, it is all speculation. The point here is to consider the possibility that future bible predictions will come true just as they are written. Again, apply that thought to Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense”.

One of my favorite examples of Rule #6 has to do with the prophet Daniel reading the book of Jeremiah:

“In the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years.” (Daniel 9:2, NIV)

In this passage, Daniel is reading Jeremiah. He discovers that Jeremiah made a prediction that the City of Jerusalem would be in desolation (no people) for seventy years. During the time

Daniel wrote this passage, Jerusalem had been captured by the Babylonians and is in ruins. Notice in the text above that Daniel validates Jeremiah as a prophet. Daniel says in this verse that he “understood from the Scriptures”. He is validating Jeremiah as a prophet and Jeremiah’s book as part of scriptures.

What I really want you to notice is that Daniel takes the seventy years of captivity literally. Daniel does not say, “Well, you know, the Bible is not meant to be taken literally, after all it has been translated into many languages, and I’m reading copies of copies and this is not an original. Maybe seventy years is just figurative speech. After all, whoever heard of a conquered people who were transported and scattered over a thousand miles regrouping and going back to their original location? No! Daniel took this literally and spent most of Chapter 9 praying to God as Daniel calculated the seventy years were almost up. Daniel knew that God was going to keep his word and his prayer focused on the Nation of Israel repenting of their sins that caused the captivity in the first place.

Daniel understood Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense”. The plain text said 70 years, and it meant 70 years. The reason I obsess on this is you would be surprised how many people refuse to take parts of the Bible literally when the text obviously states that passage to be literal. Here is another famous example:

“They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. ⁵(The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This is the first resurrection. ⁶Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection..”
(Revelation 20 4b-6, NIV)

In six verses of Chapter 20 of Revelation (Revelation 20:2-7), the phrase “one thousand” is mentioned six times. Six times it states that there will be a thousand-year period where Jesus reigns from the earth. Yet, a large number of Christian believers do not take this passage literally. The plain text says a thousand years. I believe when the Bible says a thousand years, it means, (hold on everybody), a thousand years. I believe it is not a day more or a day less. Yet, there is a common view, especially among Roman Catholics that this text is not meant to be taken literally. They believe it is figurative language. The Roman Catholic Church believes Jesus comes back to the earth to get the remaining believers, take them to heaven and well, that’s a wrap up. Believers go to heaven and Jesus judges those left on earth. That view holds there is no literal 1,000-year period where Jesus reigns from the planet earth. This is an old debate issue between different denominations of Christian believers. It is not a “salvation” issue, just one where I believe many people are wrong because they fail to grasp the concept of Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense.”

Again, let’s try the concept of: “If somebody who never read this book and knows nothing about Christianity were asked to interpret this passage, what would they say it means?” This “outsider” read this passage about the one thousand years, they would say, “This Jesus guy is going to reign on earth for 1,000 years”. That is all it says. The danger comes in figurative interpretation. At that point, you are no longer reading the Bible for what it says, but you are making up your own interpretation.

Another classical debate within Christianity (and Judaism) has to do with the “literalness” of the time frame of the creation of the earth. The first chapter of Genesis teaches all of creation was made in six days and God rested on the 7th day. There is a great debate within both religions as to whether or not this means six literal twenty-four hour periods or whether it refers to six long eras of time. Scholars argue that the Hebrew word “yom”, which is translated “day”, can also be translated “era of time”. Therefore, one can read the opening chapters of Genesis and translate the six days of creation as six “era’s of time”. The problem to me with the “era” interpretation is not the creation story in Genesis, but a passage from the “Ten commandments section” as written in Exodus:

⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day.
(Exodus 20:9, 11, NIV)

A rule of Hebrew grammar is when the word for day or era “yom” is preceded by a number, say, the number six, then the word “yom” is meant to be translated as a literal 24-hour day. Here in Exodus, God is telling the Israelites to rest on the 7th day because God created the world in six days and rested on the 7th day. Now supposed you knew nothing about the Bible or Christianity or Judaism and just read this passage. Would you say the Bible is talking about six literal days of creation or six eras’ of time?

There is something I mentioned in the introduction of this book that I should state again here. If you don’t believe your bible is the Word of God, that is a different issue than what I am trying to teach here. My premise is that you accept the Bible as God-inspired. If you do, I am trying to give some suggestions on how to study your bible. If you believe the world is billions of years old and that is your interpretation of the Bible, consider the possibility that are violating the principal of Rule #6 “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense”. Can God, who can do anything, make the universe in six literal days? God is God, and he can do anything he wants at any speed he wants. God created time and He exists outside of time.

Please understand this issue of six literal days versus six eras’ of time is a classical debate in Christianity and Judaism. There are many very devout Christians who believe in the long-era-of time view on this. You cannot lose your salvation if you are trusting in Jesus and you believe differently than I do on this issue. There is a whole field of study of creation science that matches geological and astronomical evidence with the Bible. There are well researched books that challenge the publicly accepted age of the earth. If this is a topic that interests you, Christian bookstores have good reference books on this topic. I happen to believe the literal six-day creation view. If I am wrong on my view, so be it. The whole point of this exercise is not to convince you of a literal six-day creation as much as I want you to “think outside the box” of our preconceived notions of what God is capable of doing. God is definitely capable of creating the world in six days. A God who can do this can also do wonderful things in your life as well. All we have to do is get beyond our “small god” concepts so as to let God work in our lives to do wonderful things.

Let us go back to the creation story. Let’s start with the premise that we don’t know for sure how old the earth is. There are the “billions of year’s” theory and the “six literal day” theory of

creation. Ask yourself, if I believe in God, and I believe the Bible is the Word of God, which way of interpretation would I rather hold on judgment day? Every believer will be rewarded one day in heaven based on our behavior as Christians (See Revelation 22:12). That is a whole topic unto itself. Ask yourself, “when I read my bible, and I believe it is God inspired, is it safer to err by being too literal or is it safer to err by not being literal enough? That is why Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense” is philosophical. It is the concept of “when in doubt, take your bible seriously. If you are not sure how to interpret the passage, ask yourself if the literal interpretation is possible and probable. You may think that a six literal day creation falls in the face of science. You may apply Rule #6 (If the plain text makes perfect sense, seek no other sense) and say, “six literal days does not make perfect sense”. I happen to disagree with that view, but so be it. Before you dismiss a bible passage as not being possible, ask yourself, “Is God capable of literally fulfilling the passage as it is described?” If not, consider the possibility that your concept of God is too small!

Rule #6, “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense” is a challenge for us to take our bible seriously. It is a great rule to remember when you are stuck on the meaning of the text. Sometimes we develop preconceived notions of what God is capable of doing and what God is not capable of doing. I purposely choose a controversial example as I simply want you to learn to think outside of our preconceived notions of what God is, and is not capable of doing. We have to remember that God is bigger than we can comprehend.

Sometimes people limit God for accountability reasons. Some people don't want to accept that God is all-powerful because then they have to be fully accountable to God for all their actions. They don't want to accept that a perfect God can stand no sin whatsoever and therefore we rationalize God as accepting our faults. Even as believers, we sometimes limit what the Bible says because we are comfortable in our present situation and don't believe (or don't want) God to fix or change that situation. We rationalize the text of the Bible to mean something lighter than what it really says as to not have to change our lifestyle.

Rule #6 is a challenge to do more with your life as a believer than your current state. God always wants you to grow in your faith and maturity as a believer. Rule #6 is about “thinking outside the box”. It is about accepting the text of the Bible at face value and asking God to give you the faith to believe and obey the text as it is written. We often make the mistake of not wanting to take the text at face value for the fear of the implication of what that really means in terms of how we should live our life.

“Whenever I have made a mistake in interpreting the Bible, it is usually when I have not taken it literally enough.” Chuck Missler

Chuck Missler is a long-term teacher of the Bible with an emphasis on prophecy. He was commenting one time about his “early cassette tapes” that are still in circulation. A few times in his life he has stated how “he once interpreted it this way, and now (that he is older) he interprets it that way”. He has stated his mistake is usually not being literal enough in his interpretation. What I have found is that principal not only applies to prophecy, but also to accept the stories, the teaching, and the principals of the Bible at face value. My challenge to you the reader, as well as to myself is to constantly grow and mature in your faith in God. To do that, we occasionally have to look at the Bible text and say, “Are we doing just what the

Bible commands us to do, or are we limiting ourselves by limiting what the Bible text actually says?” “Are we limiting our faith in God’s ability to help us through this situation because we are limiting our belief in the miraculous story just as it is written? Every now and then, these are good questions to think about and contemplate as you read your bible. If you can’t remember all of that philosophical stuff, just remember Rule #6: “If the Plain Text Makes Perfect Sense, Seek No Other Sense”.