

# Session 7

## The Literal Interpretation of Scripture

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# Overview

Issue

What is the Bible?

Interpreting the Bible

Some unhelpful approaches

Israel and the Church

Some difficult passages



# 1. Issue

God has made many encouraging promises to Israel – eg:

- 12 tribes will be reunited (Ez 37.22)
- Dispersion will be gathered and all Israel will be brought to their land (Is 11)
- Israel's Messiah will reign and Israel will live in peace (Is 9.6-7)

God's promises were expressed to last forever (eg 1 Chron 16.14-18)

Did God intend his promises to be taken literally?





## 2. What is the Bible?

It is divinely inspired – 2 Tim 3.16

It was written under the power of the Holy Spirit – 2 Pet 1.21

In short, it is God's words to us – Matt 22.31

Note: The Bible's very words are inspired – 1 Cor 2.13



### 3. Interpreting the Bible

“Literal” interpretation:

- Give words (God’s words) their natural meaning
- Including metaphors and other figures of speech
- Remember context

Supported by literal fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies  
– eg Micah 5.2

Holy Spirit will help – John 16.13

But “spiritualising” is not a Biblical concept



## 4. Some unhelpful approaches

“[I]n the dispensation of the Holy Spirit ... our guide is the Scriptures of God in their broad outlines .... Our guide is not, and never shall be what the Scriptures call ‘the letter that killeth’.” (Farrar, *Sermons on Eternal Hope*, 1878)

But every word of the Bible is inspired and therefore important – not just the “broad outlines”

Statement in 2 Cor 3.6 that “the letter killeth” is not the Bible condemning itself – rather, is a contrast between law and gospel (see vv 7 (“written”) and 8)

## 4. Some unhelpful approaches (cont.)



“[W]e understand words in a literal sense first, then in a figurative sense if the literal doesn't make sense.” (Worldwide Church of God, “Literal and Figurative”, 1994)

But this leads to some strange results – eg:

- Rapture “lacks scriptural support” (*New Geneva Study Bible*, 1995)
- Two witnesses in Rev 11 “symbolize churches rather than specific individuals” – notwithstanding that v 9 refers to the witness’ “dead bodies”

How does one know where to draw the line?



## 5. Israel and the Church

Are distinct – 1 Cor 10.32

Are different:

	<b>Israel</b>	<b>Church</b>
<b>Beginning</b>	Abraham – Gen 12.2-3	Pentecost – Acts 2
<b>Members</b>	By lineage – Gen 12.7	By believing in Christ – Eph 1.13
<b>Hope</b>	Blessing in land – Jer 32.37-38	Rapture to heaven – John 14.2-3



## 5. Israel and the Church (cont.)

Israel understood God's promises literally – eg Luke 24.21

There was never any suggestion that this was wrong – see Acts 1.6-7

Accordingly, any as-yet unfulfilled promises will be fulfilled – Matt 5.17-18, Acts 3.21



## 6. Some difficult passages

Romans 4.11-17: Abraham is “the father of all them that believe” (v 11).

A non-dispensational view	The Biblical meaning
<p>All who believe, whether OT believers or NT believers, form part of the same family.</p> <p>Accordingly, Israel and the church are the same.</p>	<p>Here, “father” means originator (like Isaiah 9.6 (JND)). Verse 11 does not teach that Israel and the Church are one.</p> <p>Chapter 4 distinguishes between content of Abraham’s faith and ours (vv 21 and 24).</p>



## 6. Some difficult passages (cont.)

Galatians 3.7: “They which are of faith ... are *the children of Abraham.*”

A non-dispensational view	The Biblical meaning
Again, all believers of all times form part of the same family.	The point is that blessing comes through faith and not through works. This was the case with Abraham and remains the case with Christians.  But this verse not say that the blessing is the same.

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## 6. Some difficult passages (cont.)

Galatians 6.15-16: “Peace be on them ... and upon *the Israel of God.*”

A non-dispensational view	The Biblical meaning
<p>Important teaching of Galatians is absence of distinction between Jew and Gentile (eg v 15).</p> <p>Therefore, “Israel of God” must be the Church.</p>	<p>Absence of distinction concerns those “in Christ Jesus” (v 15).</p> <p>Distinction between Israel and the Church remains. “Israel” still means Israel.</p>



## 6. Some difficult passages (cont.)

Romans 9: “They are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (v 6); “I (God) will call them my people, which were not my people” (v 25).

A non-dispensational view	The Biblical meaning
<p>The church has replaced Israel as God’s chosen people.</p>	<p>Verse 6 distinguishes between faithful and non-faithful Israelites; v 25 does not teach that the church replaces Israel but that God shows grace to those who are/were not His people.</p> <p>Chapters 9-11 maintain dispensational distinctions (eg 11.25: “blindness ... until the fulness of the Gentiles”).</p>

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## 7. Conclusions

Israel was God's chosen people in OT times

The church is an entirely new thing – called out after Christ's finished work, united to Him as head

During the time of the church, Israel is set aside as “not my people”

After the rapture, the prophetic clock will resume

OT prophets made literal predictions, which were understood literally by those who heard them

God is faithful – He keeps His promises

The church is heavenly and has a heavenly hope – mixing up Israel and the church robs Israel of its blessings and the church of hers