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### **Presentation Transcript**

#### **Bible Stories for Adults, Part 1 – Ground Rules**

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**October 26, 2018**

Our title today is *Ground Rules – Bible Stories for Adults* number one. It's the first in a series in which we discuss the stories of the Bible – both Old and New Testaments – not as children's stories, but as information that God wants us to get as adults. This first installment will be about how we're going to do that – the ground rules for learning what God wants us to learn from the stories in the Bible.

When I was a young minister, I gave a sermon about the return of Christ. I started in Revelation rather than from the Old Testament, though I did refer to that as well. One of the things I used a lot in that sermon was the picture, in Revelation, of Jesus Christ returning on a white horse. Later, someone asked me if He was really coming back on a white horse, or was that just a symbol? What do you think? If the Bible says it, then it's true? Or does God sometimes use symbols to communicate His meaning to us? And how do you know when He's using a symbol or when He means something literally?

Some people think the church mentioned in the Bible is just a symbol for the Kingdom of God on earth, and that anything that's going to happen in Revelation will be done by the church in this age. If that's true, then we all better become political activists, right? So, I mean, it's a touchy situation how to interpret what the Bible means by what's on the page.

I also met a young man, some years ago, who had been raised in the church – our version of it – and he told me that he had decided that none of it made any sense, because you could take it any way you wanted to. And he could point to people who had varying beliefs, looking at the same scriptures. I think he may still believe in God, but not in anything God says in the Bible with any accuracy, because he's confused about that.

I also sit in my counseling office and listen to people who tell me that God created life on earth by evolution. A lot of people believe that. So that's an understandable way to think about it – and

a lot do – but that way they don't have to be in conflict – or see conflict – between science and religion over how it all started. But is that true? We can think about that, too, as we read the stories in the Bible.

So this series is my humble attempt to come to accurate conclusions about what the Bible means – in other words, understanding the Bible with *God's* meaning instead of our own. And to do that, we will first need to lay down some ground rules so that we can proceed in an orderly fashion.

So, seven ground rules for understanding the Bible. Number one, let's read Hebrews 1: 1 through 2. Paul, here, says:

**Hebrews 1:1-2** – *Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets. Where would we read about that? Well, in the Old Testament, right? And also the New. But in these last days, He has spoken to us by his Son, whom He has appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world.*

So what can we learn from this? Well, Jesus is called the Word of God in the first chapter of John and the Bible is also called the Word of God. So that's what the Bible internally claims to be – the Word of God – God's words and thoughts communicated through Jesus, and then the prophets, and by other Bible writers, inspired to write what He wanted written.

So our first rule is: *God communicates His will through the Bible.* Okay? That's what's in it. The Bible internally claims to be that book.

Now, some people disagree with that. My own brother told me, "The Bible is just an old book – out of date and doesn't fit in the modern world." He doesn't see it as relevant for today – at least, not yet, he doesn't. Now I love my brother, so I don't argue with him about it. I just ask God to help me bear good fruit for him to see – preaching by living, right? Okay, so let's continue.

When someone speaks to us, they're communicating. They're passing information. The Father's intentions are passed through Jesus by the Bible to us. That's the first rule. God's trying to tell us something.

I had a wonderful woman of great age call me once. I used to be her pastor years previously. And in one of the splits in our greater body, she affiliated with a very constricting cult born out of our church. Just to give you the picture, she told me that she would be disfellowshipped if anyone found out she was calling me or did listen to any of my audio presentations. She asked me if I thought the head of her cult was the direct spokesperson for Jesus Christ. And I referred her to the scripture that we just read, and told her God now speaks to us through Jesus Christ, and that everything He needs to say is in the Bible already – no need for anybody to take Jesus' place and become our intercessor. And I explained to her that she already had One. So all she had to do was

just read what He says for herself – no need for her cult leader to interpret the Bible with his own personal slant on it.

That's the first thing that we want to get clear here – the Bible communicates God's will to us through the Bible. That's what it is. It's His communication to humankind.

Second point that we're going to go by, as we go through this study, is that *the Bible is perfect just as it is*. But does that mean that there aren't mistranslations from translation to translation? I don't mean that at all. Of course there are. But, if the Bible really is perfect the way God wants it to be, and says it is, then throughout the translations, there's a way to learn what God wants out of the Bible, no matter how it's translated – you know, as long as that translation is accepted by most people. I can't think of a translation that I couldn't find that to be true of, unless you go with one of the Bible translations provided by a particular cult that's spinning it just the way they want it. I do believe that most of the Bible translations we have today, people have translated in good faith, even though they have mistakenly translated it, in many cases, according to their own biases. So the Bible is perfect just as it is, and here's a proverb that we can look at – Proverbs 30, and verse 5:

**Proverbs 30:5** – *Every word of God proves true.*

So don't confuse what *men* say with what the Bible says. The Bible is perfect just the way it is, and every word of God proves true. It's a perfect book, There's no inconsistencies or contradictions. People *think* that there have been those, but that's because they don't know enough about the Bible, or they're not reading it properly. There are always explanations for the things people bring up as points of confusion.

Jesus ripped the organized religion of His day. In Matthew 15:8 and 9, it's says:

**Matthew 15:8-9** – *This people honors Me with their lips – He's quoting Isaiah, by the way – but their heart is far from Me. In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*

So it's not a good thing to confuse what men say with what the Bible says, because men tend to try to make the Bible say what they want it to. So when we read the Bible, we need to be careful not to insert our opinions and preconceptions, or those of others, in place of what God says in the Bible. So separate what your church teaches you from what God teaches you in the Bible.

Does that mean that I'm disrespecting your church? No. But, if you do that, and if your church is right about the Bible, then you and your church are going to agree. And none of us should have anything to worry about, if we try to just read what the Bible says and to understand it for what it says.

I think I misstated one of my points here. Point two is: *The Bible is perfect just like it is.* And point three is: *Don't confuse what men say with what the Bible says.* There's so much confusion about this. Most of the people I talk to are coming at me from a church's perspective, rather than a biblical perspective. And they may think that they disagree with their church on some biblical point, but then, while they might be differing from their church in one thing, they're aligned with their church in ten others – and half of those might not really be what the Bible says at all. So, we need to read the Bible for what it says, if we want to understand what *God* is communicating to us.

Fourth is, as we go through this series, we're going to *look at the Bible as a guide for living.* We started this already – Proverbs 30, verse 5.

**Proverbs 30:5** – *Every word of God proves true. He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him.*

So the Bible claims that everything in it is true, because God inspired it. And because of that, we can rely on it to protect us from wrong choices, actions and attitudes.

Here's another one that goes even deeper. It's in Hebrews 4:12:

**Hebrews 4:12-13** – *For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from His sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account.*

You know, the man that wrote this – the apostle Paul – he believed that the Word of God – the Bible – was a living, active thing – that it was the heart and soul on the communication and the mind of God. And he died willingly – beheaded by Nero – because of His beliefs about these things – none of which he ever recanted. So these statements he makes cost him his life.

So the Word of God is a living thing. It's God in print. And, if we read it, it will cut us up. It can dissect us and help us understand our true motivations, and show us how we're like God and how we're *not* like God, and what we need to do to become more like Him. And it even teaches us our goal is to try to become like God. So it even provides us our motivation.

The fifth point is that *the Bible is three stories and one big one.* The big story is the Bible is the story of how God is working His great salvation plan. That's the overall, overarching story. Every story in it, in some way, contributes to that great meaning – how God is working His great salvation plan.

One of the sub-stories in it is the story of how things got the way they are now, and how they will get fixed. In the Garden, we saw the devil enter in and that mucked everything up. And then, at

the end in Revelation, we see Christ returning to set things aright. I knew a man once who said, “The Bible tells us that in the end, we win.” And that’s true.

The second sub-story is the story of how God has dealt with human beings down through the ages *as* He works His great plan. There have been different dispensations, and ages, and different ways that God has worked, and yet with certain fundamentals always in place.

The third one is how God is taking all of us from the way we are now to the way we will become when we are with Him – one of the greatest mysteries of all time. It says, “Even the angels inquire to look into that one” – you know, “How’s He going to get us from the way we *are* to the way He wants us to be, and says we *will* be?” Pretty amazing story. Everything in the Bible contributes to that.

The sixth point...I mean, now you know why you’re reading the Bible, right? It’s the story of how God is working His great salvation plan. There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end to it. It has a flow. The sixth ground rule that we’re going to use here is, *that at any given verse in the Bible, we can stop and ask, “What’s the point?”* And that’s going to add a lot of clarity. When we come to something that’s hard to understand, like God doing His creating of the creation – all creation – in seven days, instead of wrangling endlessly about the details, we can simply ask ourselves, “By telling me this story, what does God want me to learn?”

Well, let’s think about that. One of the things that I think He wants us to learn, it seems clear, He made everything, including me. He made *everything*. That’s part of the story. Right? Even atheists who would read the Bible could look at that story and say, “The point of the story is that God made everything” – even though they don’t believe it. Secondly, one of the things that we can learn from reading that story is, that there is an order and reason to the creation and rules that are in effect – sun to rule the day, and the moon to rule the night. Right? There is reason behind the universe. It’s ordered. And there is an order in the way it was created, God tells us. Another thing that we can learn is that God loves us because we are His creation.

Now those are some pretty big points, aren’t they? But we say, “Well, I want to know exactly how He did it.” Well, good. We will, just not now. That’s not an important part of the story that God is telling us in the Bible. He leaves out the details and He hits the high spots. There’s going to come a time when every single question every human being has ever thought will be answered. But that time is not yet.

Sometimes we read a story and we can’t make sense of it, because we don’t understand the culture of the time, or the sayings of the time. One example would be Jesus’ statement that it’s easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God. Well, it helps to know that in Jesus’ day, there was a gate into Jerusalem called the Needle’s Eye. It was a small back door into the city. A camel had to get down and crawl on its belly to get under it. So what do we do when we arrive at points like this? Well, we ask, “What is

God's point here?" What point is He trying to make? Surely rich people will enter into the Kingdom. Abraham was rich and he's going to be there. So, with all this added information, if we read what he said again – if we read it knowing there's a gate called the Needle's Eye – we can see, "Oh, right. He didn't say it was *impossible*. He was just saying it was going to be more *difficult*." And, if you read the account carefully, knowing that, you can see that the word *impossible* is not there. He didn't say that. We just assume, because we know that it's impossible for a camel to go through a needle's eye. But He didn't say that. He just made that statement, and you don't even need to know about the camel and the needle's eye. You can think about Abraham, and you can think about what He said. He said, "It would be *easier* for a camel to go through the eye of a needle...." He didn't say it was impossible. So, you have to apply the rules of logic and think about it critically to understand it sometimes.

Now we can also read commentaries and other Bible helps to understand what God means in context. I've done that a lot in my life. But anytime we go outside the Bible, we have to be careful about the conclusions that people reach – just like we have to be careful about our own. These sound simple, but they're very hard to apply in real time as we read the Bible.

Okay, point number seven: *The undergirding attitude necessary to understand the Bible*. Let's read 1 Thessalonians 2:13. Paul says:

**1 Thessalonians 2:13** – *We also thank God constantly for this – that when you received the word of God – when you received the Word of God – which you heard from us, you accepted it, not as the word of men, but as what it really is – the word of God – which is at work in you believers.*

"When you received the Word of God, you accepted it as what it really is – the Word of God – which is at work in you believers." Now, most of the people I run into don't really believe it's God's word. So what attitude is necessary to see it that way? Well, if you go to Matthew 5 – one of my favorite scriptures – verse 2:

**Matthew 5:2-3** – *And He opened His mouth and taught them, saying – now this is Jesus sitting His disciples down for the first time to give them formalized instruction, and His first point is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It's as good as yours, if you're poor in spirit,"* He was telling them.

Now what He was doing was laying down some principles so that they could be successful in their life with God – in their walk with God. And this is the first one. To be *poor in spirit* means that we believe that we are completely ignorant of God and everything about Him, except that He reveals it to us. To that kind of person, the Bible is *special*. It's to be respected as the Word of God. It's not to be confused with our own opinions or the opinions of others, who may not be poor in spirit, but instead, who actually cover over God's Word with their own opinion – sometimes unintentionally and sometimes not so unintentionally – but more in line with what David said. In Psalms 119:105, he said:

**Psalms 119:105** – *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

So, David realized that the Word of God was a guide to show him how to do the things that God wanted him to do, to think the things God wanted him to think, to have the attitudes God wanted him to have, and a light for the way that he needed to walk to get to God.

So, there are seven ground rules. I'm going to go over them again one by one, just by name:

1. God communicates His will to us through the Bible.
2. The Bible is perfect just as it is.
3. Don't confuse what men say with what the Bible says.
4. The Bible is a guide for living.
5. The Bible is three stories in one big one.
6. At any given verse, we can ask, "What's the point?" And, if we think beyond the details of the moment, then we'll come to what God's trying to teach us.
7. And finally, the undergirding attitude necessary for understanding is poverty of spirit.

So now that we've covered those seven ground rules, we can start reading some of the Bible stories, as understood not so much by children, but the way God wants adults to understand them. And conversely, if we learn to read the Bible with understanding as adults, we will learn that any child can understand 99% of what we learn.

The Bible is sort of like that book by Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. I read once that Winston Churchill, when he spoke, tried to speak to five-year-olds, and that when he did that, adults called it *clarity*. He surely observed that from seeing how God communicates to us. Sometimes we just make it way more complicated than it needs to be.

Will Jesus really ride a white horse? Well, that's not the point! In John's time, a horse was a weapon. And the point is that He's coming back to fight the enemies of God. So it that what God is communicating to us? I think so. Well, will He ride a white horse? Well, He might. Or that might just be a symbol – I mean it *is* a symbol – whether He rides a white horse or not. But that really isn't that important to me or to you. What He's communicating to us, instead of whether it's a white horse or not, is the *gospel* – the good news – the most important event in world history – how everything is going to get straightened out. Why quibble about the means of transportation. Let's just get real.

Okay, so we've laid the foundation. Next time, for our first Bible story for adults, we will look at the creation story and see what it says and what we can learn from it that God has for us, aside from all the little details that we could argue about until Christ returns.

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