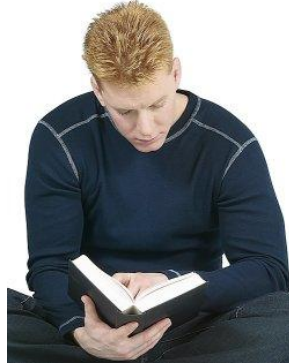


# Reading Scripture Rightly

Jim Elliff

When reading a section of Scripture, we will find that a passage almost always comes across weighted on one side of an issue or another. I mean this: a passage is written intended to drive a certain point home, aimed at a particular audience, for a specific reason by an author who knew what was needed. He drives his nail to the heart. That passage should stare at us, disturb us and call us to action and faith. We should ask, "What did this mean to the original readers and what does it mean to me?"



Another place in the Word, read another day, is a truth on the other side of the question, just as strongly stated, just as moving and demanding. However, we often feel compelled to balance these as soon as they are read, and we run to the place of least tension. This is the business of systematic theology. It's a worthy task, if handled wisely, and sometimes quite satisfying. But there is a danger—this method often takes the sharpness of the text away. We simply cannot let the passage say what it says and do what it is meant to do.

For instance, a man may read that he is to exert diligence in pursuing truths from God, but, on the other side his mind flies to passages that say God alone grants that understanding and unless God opens the heart, he is helpless to obtain any benefit from his diligence. So, the mind patches together a way both things are really one thing. But now you've ripped something away that the author intended to emphasize. He makes one point, but he purposely did not make the other point. He wasn't writing a systematic theology, but was driving a truth home.

In some odd cases, the meaning of the first statement is turned on its head and all the potency is excised from the text by our propensity to blend all seemingly contrary thoughts together. As we read, we say, "Christ does not really mean we are to give up our possessions because in this place He says that some believers are wealthy." So as we read we are denying the statement before we let it say anything to us. And, without intending to do so, we are telling ourselves and perhaps others that it would have been better if Jesus would have said something much more benign.

My take these days is to be slower about balancing, but to let the original intent of the passage sting me, move me, drive me to what I need to be. That takes some mental work, because the mind is naturally bent on systematizing. I tell myself the author knows what he's saying and he means it. Then, only after feeling strongly what the author meant me to see (perhaps even separating the one side from the other by a period of time), I let the other passages comfort or challenge me by giving me another side.

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