

# OUT OF THE FRYING PAN AND INTO THE . . .

BY VERN FOYTHRESS

"We should interpret the Bible *literally*!" Joe asserts.

"But what do you mean?" Sam queries. "Jesus says, 'I am the vine' (John 15:5). Is Jesus saying that He has stems sprouting green leaves with chlorophyll in them?"

Joe: "Of course not. Everyone knows that He is using a picture, a metaphor."

Sam: "So He is speaking metaphorically, not literally."

Joe: "Well, yes."

Sam: "If you interpreted the statement literally, and not metaphorically, you would be misinterpreting it, right? Saying 'Always interpret literally' becomes a recipe for twisting everything in the Bible where God spoke metaphorically."

Joe: "But, but . . . talking about metaphors is dangerous. The liberals make everything into a metaphor or a symbol for their own ideas. They use fancy and evasive interpretations in order to avoid accepting the Bible's claims."

Sam: "I agree, we mustn't do that. But the answer is not to throw the baby out with the bath water. We must responsibly submit to all that the Bible says, rather than imposing our own man-made requirements on the Bible."

What is the answer here? Is a "literal" approach best? And what do we mean by "literal"? Joe has found out that the answer is not as easy as he thought.

Joe wants to run as far from liberalism as he can. But in running to the opposite extreme, he has fallen into an error just like the liberals. Like them, he imposes man-made ideas on the Bible. The liberal forces the Bible to conform to fashionable modern ideas and prejudices. Joe forces the Bible to conform to his man-made preconception that everything ought to be maximally literal for safety's sake.

But God is greater than our preconceptions and our man-made ideas. In effect, the Bible in its teaching about God says back to Joe, "Let God be God." Leave it up to God to decide when He wants to speak literally and when He wants to speak metaphorically. Let Him decide whether to tell about a historical happening in David's defeat of Goliath, or tell an allegorical story about two sons in the parable of the prodigal son, or write a poetic song of praise in the Psalms, or write a letter instructing us in doctrine in the epistle to the Romans.

God caused the Bible to be written (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). *He* makes the decisions. "He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3). God gives the ultimate standard for our interpretation of the Bible.

But Joe still may feel that his struggles have not been put to rest. How do we as human beings come to know the mind of God? How do we understand what God means? How do we tell what is literal, what is metaphorical, what is symbolic, what is typological?

## TO BEGIN WITH, JESUS AND HIS APOSTLES ARE INSPIRED INTER- PRETERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

The Holy Spirit must guide us into the truth (John 16:13). Only through His purifying work do we overcome the sinful tendencies to impose our own ideas on the Bible. The Holy Spirit opens our hearts to see what God is actually saying, even when it is surprising or difficult for sinful people to accept (Acts 16:14; Ps. 119:18).

When our hearts submit to God, we find that the Bible itself provides indications about how to interpret its various passages. To begin with, Jesus and His apostles are inspired inter-

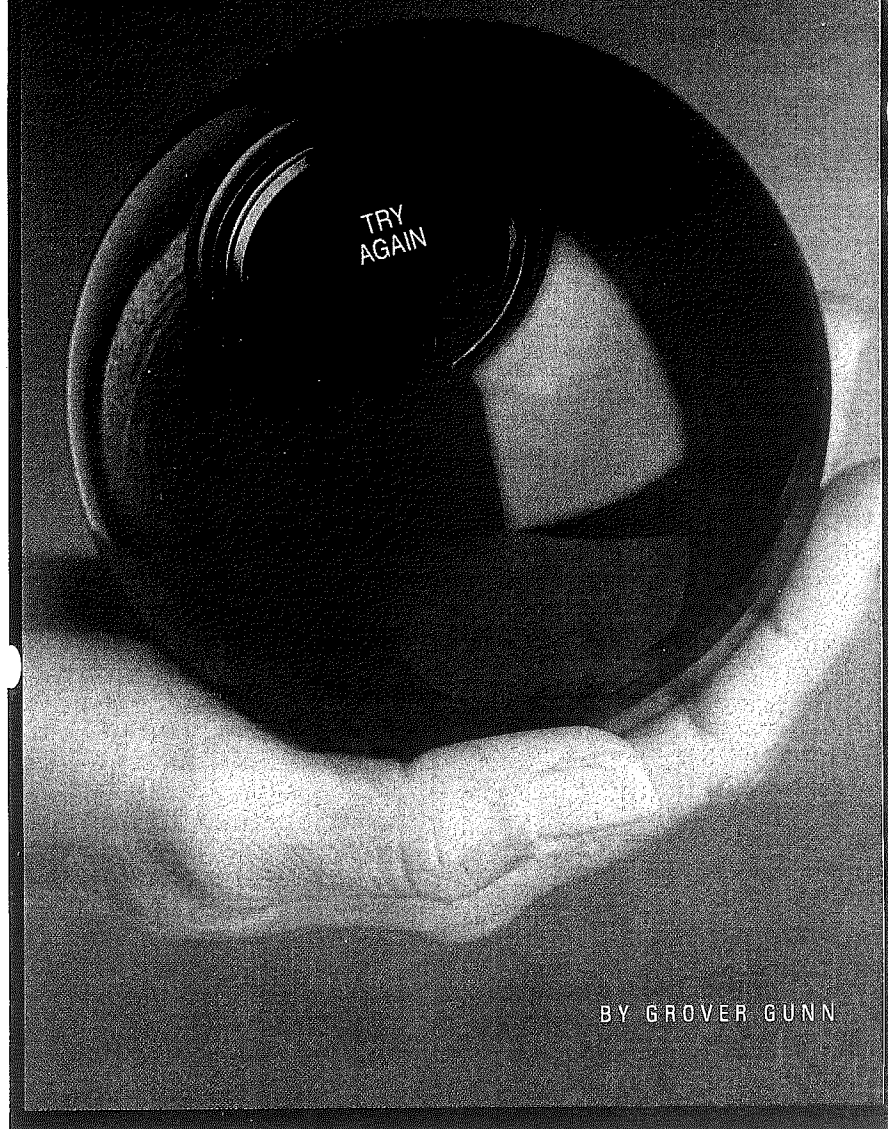
preters of the Old Testament. Their examples, as well as the principles that they set forth, start us on the right way of interpretation.

What can we learn from them? They show us that the Old Testament contains both literal and symbolic elements. For example, their references to Adam, Eve, Abraham, David, and others confirm that the Old Testament is telling the stories of real people. The Old Testament histories are not myth or fiction. At the same time, the animal sacrifices, the Exodus, Joshua's conquest, the temple, the Israelite kings, and the land of Canaan all display truths about God's ways with man. They point forward to God's climactic work of salvation in Jesus Christ. They thus offer us "types," shadows and copies of God's salvation in Christ.

How do we tell what God intends literally and what symbolically? How do we tell when He uses both dimensions at once, such as in the Exodus? The Exodus is *both* a real event in space and time *and* a type or shadow of Christ's delivering us from bondage to sin and death.

The fundamental answer must be that God Himself instructs us. Scripture interprets Scripture. The Bible *itself* gives indications, whether in the immediate context or in some other place. For example, Isaiah 51:9-11 uses the Exodus as the backdrop for looking forward to the future salvation that God will accomplish in Christ. It thereby indicates **CONTINUED ON PAGE 56**

# "TRY AGAIN"



BY GROVER GUNN

that the Exodus has both a reality as an actual event of long ago and a symbolic dimension picturing final deliverance. Using this clue, we may understand how the Old Testament prophets use the language of kingship, temple, sacrifice, and prosperity to picture the ultimate deliverance in Christ.

WE MUST RECOGNIZE THAT ALL OF SCRIPTURE REFLECTS THE GLORY OF JESUS.

Context is all-important in interpretation. Look at the words that God is speaking. But look also at the context in which He puts those words. When Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11), the context of John 10 indicates that He is not focusing on literal sheep, but on shepherding people. When Jesus tells the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32), the context (15:3) indicates that it is a parable — a made-up story driving home a spiritual point.

We pay attention to context. We pay attention not only to the context of one sentence, but the context of a paragraph, a single book of the Bible, the biblical time in which the book was written, and finally the Bible as a whole. The New Testament use of the Old

Testament helps us to understand more fully both literal and symbolic dimensions in the Scriptures.

Joe hopes to protect the authority of the Bible, and we unite with him in this desire. But his results are not so fortunate. Many people, hearing Joe's advice, will move *not* toward thorough submission to God's Word, but toward a one-sided approach in which they ignore metaphors and symbols. They flatten out the parts of the Bible that contain poetry. And they deaden their sensitivity to symbolic depth and the artistic power that God may sometimes use to enhance the implications.

God is wiser than we. He can use the full resources of His wisdom and of the richness of language in expressing His truth and love. We must recognize that all of Scripture reflects the glory of Jesus Christ. Every page reveals Christ to us (Luke 24:44–47). We affirm the clarity of the Bible's presentation of Christ and His Gospel. Equally, we affirm the unsearchable richness of Christ (Eph. 3:8, 19–21; Col. 2:3) and of the Bible that expounds His richness. Thus, we are prepared to acknowledge the symbolic richness, along with the literal truths, contained in the wisdom of God in Scripture. ■

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Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple and to claim this promise of deliverance. Jesus countered this false interpretation with another Scripture: You shall not tempt the Lord your God. Jesus knew that the Father desired Him to bring in the kingdom through the Cross, not through public spectacles. The Son is not going to misinterpret biblical promises as a means of thwarting the will of the Father. True faith seeks not to control God but to discern and submit to His holy will.

Third, the *summum bonum* (greatest good) is not our immediate happiness or gratification. We should not interpret Scripture as if God's purpose is to fulfill our every wish. God's purpose is to glorify Himself, and that is the true *summum bonum*. God is not our servant or a consumer product. He is the Lord of the universe, and let His name be exalted!

The promises of Scripture need to be interpreted in the light of this true *summum bonum*. We find this sort of interpretation in the answer to ques-

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tion 66 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This answer mentions the "promise of long life and prosperity" that is attached to the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother." Should we interpret this promise mechanically and assume that those who honor their parents the most will live the longest lives and possess the most wealth? No, the catechism correctly qualifies the promise with the clause "as far as it shall serve for God's glory, and their own good."

When we use the "Magic Eight Ball" hermeneutic, the answer is always "It is most unlikely." We must "Try again" using biblical methods. ■

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**CORRECTION** Because of an editing change, an article by Dr. Edmund Clowney about the tabernacle in the December issue of *Tabletalk* incorrectly said that St. Helen's Church in London restored a sloping floor leading up to a high altar after the building was destroyed by truck bombs. The article should have read that the restoration actually went back to an even earlier design, before the sloping floor and the high altar were added, so that preaching is again central in the church. *Tabletalk* regrets the error.