

Bible Interpretation Lessons from Jigsaw Puzzles

Our family enjoys putting together 1000-piece puzzles, especially when we are “snowed-in”. I have long observed that putting together a jigsaw puzzle is a rich analogy, or comparison, for coming to an understanding of the Bible, and especially topics related to end-time events.

If the Bible’s truths are likened to a puzzle,

1. You can have confidence that all the pieces are there, and that everything really does fit together somehow. (This confidence fades for real jigsaw puzzles, especially if you have little children or dogs)
A puzzle has different sections (sky, grass, trees, water, buildings, ...). The Bible has many truths: about God himself, about the nature of man, about sin and salvation, law and grace, creation and providence, God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, historical matters, prophecies of things to come, life after death, heaven and hell, etc. We can have confidence that all the pieces that we need to know are in the Bible (Dt. 29:29), and that the whole thing fits together somehow.
2. A jigsaw puzzle gives the advantage of showing on the box what it should look like when complete. We don’t have it that easy with the Bible, but we can know that when it is done it will all flow together into a beautifully consistent image, not a jumbled up patch-work of mismatched pieces. Contrast a totally random quilt with one that has a very intricate pattern.
3. When you first start out, it looks impossible. New Christians probably haven’t even read the Bible, and so when they start, it all seems like a mystery. As there is satisfaction in finding two pieces that match, so we are delighted when the Holy Spirit enlightens us. We say “I never saw that before!”.
4. You must be patient – neither 1000-piece puzzles nor accurate Biblical understanding will come together quickly. A puzzle might take a week, but understanding the Bible will take a lifetime.
5. It is usually a collaborative effort. When your wife or child puts together a section, you also benefit. So with the Bible – we have many good preachers, teachers, and scholars, and we all benefit from their experience and insights.
6. The puzzle will not come together on its own – you have to put some time into it. How do you expect to understand the Bible if you never read and study it?
7. You must put ALL the puzzle together, not just the easy parts. You perhaps have the pieces from the “Romans Road” and Jn. 3:16, and so have experienced salvation, but don’t stop! You wouldn’t stop doing a jigsaw puzzle just because you found 5 pieces that go together.

So how exactly do you put together a puzzle, or develop Biblical understanding?

1. You always start by putting all the pieces right-side up and then separating out all the edge-pieces. Then you put the edge together all around. This sets the boundary, or the foundation for everything else. In the Bible, you should get a firm foundation in the basic truths of the gospel, before trying to understand the nitty-gritty of Revelation or the significance of the Temple furniture.
2. Then you start looking for pieces that seem to obviously go together, by their color and the image on each one. Make piles of each kind of piece, without worrying yet about how they all go together. Once this is done, choose a pile and look for pieces that fit together. Sometimes I make literal lists of Bible verses that I think have some bearing on a topic, and then start looking for similarities and contrasts, and try to determine how they all fit together.
3. Don’t worry about how everything fits together yet, just keep working on your little section.
4. Start with the easiest parts (sky is usually harder because there is no way to know which side is up, and they all pretty much look alike). Heb. 5:11 – 6:3 shows how there is a distinction between the “easy”, or the foundational topics, and the deeper things, by contrasting babies who can only handle milk, against grownups who need meat. 6:1-2 even lists some of those foundational truths.

5. Pay most attention to the design and the “right side up” – the shape doesn’t even matter if the pieces aren’t even in the same part of the picture. This would be like trying to make two verses agree, when they aren’t even talking about the same thing. Just because some chapters are acrostics (Each verse starting with a sequential letter of the Hebrew alphabet) doesn’t mean you can force a connection between all the verses that start with the same letter. Ps. 34:2 and Ps. 119:9 both start with the letter ‘beth’, but that doesn’t mean there is a connection in meaning.
6. It is sometimes possible to force two pieces together if the shapes seem to fit and the colors seem to match, but if you hold them up to the light, you will see that the shapes aren’t really right. You want them to fit, but the puzzle will never be right until you admit they don’t go, separate them, and find where they really go. Not all verses are meant to go together. For example, “Judas went out and hanged himself”, and “Go and do thou likewise”.

You may have some pieces that you think are right, but eventually see it just doesn’t work. You will not really get anywhere unless you admit the error, take the pieces apart, and redo it. The puzzle must go together in the way it was designed to fit, not the way you want it to look. This is especially true of Bible doctrine. You may be laboring under a false interpretation of something for years, and even put together some significant doctrine, but if it isn’t right, it isn’t right, and you will be handicapped in all your other Biblical understanding until you rip it apart and rebuild on valid scriptural premises. For example, “Miracles aren’t for today”, “Tongues passed away with the early church”, amillennialism, etc.

7. When two sections don’t fit, it is because there is something else that must go between them to draw them together. So if you have two “sections” of Biblical understanding that seem to be in conflict, like grace and works, you should be looking for something that goes between them. For example, God is love, but he is also a consuming fire. He is merciful, but also is a jealous God. He will not pass over sin, but has provided a substitute so we can be forgiven.
8. All the pieces have to go somewhere. Do you have Bible verses you don’t like, because they conflict with your church’s doctrine, or because they tend to expose something in your heart that you would like to remain hidden? Ignoring them won’t help. Your puzzle will never be complete unless you find their place.
9. Sometimes you are just SURE there is a missing piece, but after a while you have an Aha! moment when you find it. Why couldn’t you see it before? Partly because it is mixed up with a hundred other pieces, but usually because you are making a false assumption on what it “should” look like.
10. When a small section starts coming together, then start looking to see how it fits in with the edge, or the parts of the puzzle that are already assembled. Mercy and atonement; incarnation, death and resurrection; Jew and Gentile reconciled in one body of believers; first and second coming of Christ; King of Israel and Lamb of God; etc.
11. You wouldn’t throw out a piece just because you can’t figure out where it goes. So you can’t discard scripture you don’t understand. You don’t reject it, you put it aside and know that eventually its place and purpose will become plain. Some churches would like to throw out the book of Acts, but they will never get a good picture that way.
12. Eventually you will be forced to put together the “sky” pieces, that have no details and very little difference in color. For these you have to start looking just at the shapes to see what can go together. So in the Bible, there are parts that are much harder to understand and it will take much time and detailed study to “put it all together”. This is one benefit of Biblically sound and gifted teachers. They can put the pieces together and then their hearers can say “Yes, now I see it! It really does fit together.!” Understanding it when you see it all assembled is much easier than pulling all the pieces together from a stack, one at a time.

Isa. 28:9-10 – “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little”