

# ***How to Interpret Scripture Dealing with Difficult Passages***

Lesson #12 for June 20, 2020

Scriptures: 2 Timothy 2:10-15; 1 Chronicles 29:17; James 4:6-10; Galatians 6:9; Acts 17:11; 2 Peter 3:15-16.

1. Already in the days of Peter and Paul, there were some things which were “hard to understand, **which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.**” (2 Peter 3:15-16, *NKJV*\*†)
2. There are three important things to notice in this brief statement: (1) Peter already considered Paul’s writings to be a part of the Scriptures; (2) Already, untaught and unstable people were twisting what Paul had said to their own destruction; (3) Only **some** things are difficult to understand, not all things.
3. Therefore, this week we will take a look at approaches we should take to apparently difficult texts.
4. One of the most common reasons that ordinary people have difficulty understanding some passages of Scripture is the use of the traditional *King James Version*. In that case, the problem is the use of ancient language with which many people in our day are not familiar. People need to move to the *New King James Version* or some more up-to-date version to avoid that difficulty. Of course, for those who are already familiar with the language of the *King James Version*, it is fine. It is good to try a new translation to challenge our thinking with something new. The Bible was originally written in up-to-date language.
5. Anyone who has spent time with Scripture and has struggled to understand all that is written there will recognize that there are some difficult passages. We should not find this surprising at all. An infinite God used ordinary people in ancient times and cultures which we do not fully understand to instruct those of us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century about His infinite character and government. We should be amazed that the Bible is as clear as it is!
6. But, let us admit that those who want to destroy trust in the Bible will find difficulties and apparent contradictions and errors. Some of those errors might be a result not of the original document but of copyists or translators down through the generations.

Some look to us gravely and say, “Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?” This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. **All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.**—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,\* Book 1, 16.2.†

7. Such difficulties need not trouble the student who takes all of the Bible and compares Scripture with Scripture, always taking it in a spirit of humility and submission.
8. Any one of us who has confronted or perhaps lived among people with a different culture and language should immediately recognize those challenges.

9. So-called scholars who do not believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture simply assume that apparent contradictions and mistakes are there because the Bible is “only” a human document.
10. Seventh-day Adventists who believe in the inspiration of all 66 books of the Bible must believe that God has done whatever is necessary to preserve His Word until our day in a form and with a meaning that correctly represents Him. If He has not, then He will forgive us for misunderstanding! God has preserved our Bible exceptionally well through time.
11. As we read, we need to recognize that Bible writers used non-technical, ordinary, everyday language to describe what they were talking about. Sometimes, they used idioms that we are not familiar with. Maybe these statements are imprecise; but, they are not untruthful.

Some discrepancies might be due to minor variations and errors caused by copyists and translators of the Bible. Most of those transmissional errors are unintentional changes, where copyists confused similar letters or, when copying a text, the copyist accidentally “skips ahead to another word or line with the same word or letter. This tendency is compounded when there are no spaces between words or punctuation marks, which certainly was the case for Greek texts and may have been true of Hebrew as well.”—Paul D. Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 46. Sometimes a reversal in the order of two letters or words occurs. For example, in John 1:42 the name “John” [*I’annou*], as found in several manuscripts, is read “Jonah” [*Iōna*] in some other manuscripts (see Wegner, *A Student’s Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, p. 48, for this and other examples). Such problems should not distress us. First of all, the biblical manuscripts are by far the most reliable and best-preserved manuscripts of the ancient world. No other literature is transmitted in so many manuscripts and is copied so meticulously in reference to the original composition as are the biblical manuscripts. Second, those minor changes can be corrected in light of the other evidence that is available. They do not affect any major doctrine or teaching of the Bible. While copyists and translators generally have been extremely careful in their work, they were not inspired as were the original biblical authors. Ellen G. White was aware that there “might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators.” But for her, all those “mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”—Ellen G. White, [*Manuscript 16, 1888* (written at Minneapolis, Minn., in autumn of 1888);] *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 16.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** 159-160. [Greek names in brackets are in the source. Reference in brackets is added. See the full text of 1SM 16.2 in Item #6 above.]<sup>†§</sup>

12. When reading the Bible and interpreting it for ourselves, we must be honest and careful. We must not brush over difficulties, pretending like they do not exist. So, how can we be sure that the answers that we believe or teach are correct? Do they correspond with other Scriptures? Are they supported by the writings of Ellen White? Do they make sense?

**God never asks us to believe, without giving sufficient evidence upon which to base our faith. His existence, His character, the truthfulness of His word, are all established by testimony that appeals to our reason; and this testimony is abundant. Yet God has never removed the possibility of doubt.** Our faith must rest upon evidence, not demonstration.

Those who wish to doubt will have opportunity; while those who really desire to know the truth will find plenty of evidence on which to rest their faith.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*\* 105.2.†

Compare the story of Job.

13. If we do not have an immediately satisfactory answer for some Bible difficulty, it is better to be honest about it and wait until we understand it better. Being honest builds trust, especially when dealing with those whom we are trying to instruct or who are unfamiliar with our beliefs.
14. How do we deal with passages that seem to disagree with our favorite theories? Often, the difficulty with “troublesome passages” is that they clearly teach things that we do not want to believe or accept! Are we willing to adjust our thinking to be in accordance with truth as seen in the Bible? Or, are we trying to adjust the teachings of the Bible to agree with our thinking?

**Disguise it as they may, the real cause of doubt and skepticism, in most cases, is the love of sin.** The teachings and restrictions of God’s word are not welcome to the proud, sin-loving heart, and those who are unwilling to obey its requirements are ready to doubt its authority. In order to arrive at truth, we must have a sincere desire to know the truth and a willingness of heart to obey it.—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*\* 111.1.†

15. So, what should we do with passages that we do not fully understand and which do not seem to fit with our understanding of truth? Are we willing to really study “difficult passages” to determine exactly what they teach and then accept that truth?
16. Read James 4:6-10; 2 Chronicles 7:14; and Zephaniah 3:12. How should we “come to the Lord”? Should we consult the pastor? Or, some Bible scholar? What about consulting a commentary? Or, in some cases, a Bible dictionary? Maybe a different translation?
17. Have you ever come to the amazing realization, which is quite humbling, that there is some new insight in Scripture of which you were unaware? Don’t we all “see through a glass darkly”? (1 Corinthians 13:12)
18. Being humble and willing to admit that we might be wrong does not mean that we do not have firm convictions. But, are we submissive to biblical truth?

Nothing frightens me more than to see the spirit of variance manifested by our brethren. We are on dangerous ground when we cannot meet together like Christians, and courteously examine controverted points. **I feel like fleeing from the place lest I receive the mold of those who cannot candidly investigate the doctrines of the Bible. Those who cannot impartially examine the evidences of a position that differs from theirs, are not fit to teach in any department of God’s cause.** What we need is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Without this, we are no more fitted to go forth to the world than were the disciples after the crucifixion of their Lord. Jesus knew their destitution, and told them to tarry in Jerusalem until they should be endowed with power from on high. Every teacher must be a learner, that his eyes may be anointed to see the evidences of the advancing truth of God. The beams of the Sun of Righteousness must shine into his own heart if he would impart light to others.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,\* February 18, 1890, par. 13; *1SM*\* 411.1-2; *1888*\* 534.3.† [Notice that this was written in the context

of the disagreements at the General Conference session of 1888.]<sup>‡</sup>

We need to humble our hearts, and with sincerity and reverence search the word of life; for that mind alone that is humble and contrite can see light.—Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*,\* December 15, 1896, par. 12. Compare *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 22, 1907, par. 5; *Signs of the Times*, July 30, 1902, par. 5; YRP 109.3.

19. Can we be both humble and certain at the same time? For example, how do we respond to people who ask us why we keep the Sabbath? Our first answer should be, “Look at all the evidence in Scripture.” In the case of Sabbath observance, there is not a single passage in Scripture that supports Sunday sacredness.

Those who desire to doubt will have plenty of room. God does not propose to remove all occasion for unbelief. He gives evidence, which must be carefully investigated with a humble mind and a teachable spirit, and all should decide from **the weight of evidence**.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 3, 255.1.<sup>†</sup> Compare *Steps to Christ* 105.2 [as quoted in Item #12 above.]<sup>‡</sup>

20. Often, we assume that if we cannot figure out the answer to something, it must not have an answer. Consider the case of someone first learning about algebra. Because they cannot figure out the answer after a brief attempt does not mean that there is no possible solution to the problem! The same is true for study of the Bible.
21. Sometimes, it is appropriate to set a problem aside for a while and come back and look at it again later. It is appropriate also to consider what others have said about the passage.
22. Remember that if the Scriptures are going to be our only safety in the time of the end, shouldn't we be studying them diligently every day?
23. The Bible should never be studied without prayer. When we humbly pray to God to give us guidance, amazing insights are sometimes revealed. But, we need to remember that **the first place to look for answers to Bible difficulties is in the Bible itself**. To apply ideas and scientific notions and philosophies from the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the Bible simply means we are trying to twist it. Try to remind yourself about the surroundings and conditions in which the Bible writer was working. Always look at the difficult passages in light of the clear passages and not vice versa.
24. Taking an attitude of prayer toward Scripture always gives us a fresh perspective. Don't we recognize that we need God's help in understanding what we are reading? Are we honest in revealing to God our motives when trying to understand a passage? Does God understand the passage? Of course! Is He willing to guide us through the use of His Holy Spirit to discover the truth? Maybe not right now. But, eventually, yes. Learn patience.
25. Have you ever had the experience of suddenly realizing the answer to some perplexing problem with which you have been struggling? Is it the Holy Spirit that gives such guidance and answers? Review again *Steps to Christ* 105.2 as quoted in Item #12 above.
26. One of the challenges that troubles many people is God's command for the children of Israel when entering the land of Canaan to destroy everyone. Such people have not looked carefully at the evidence. Read **Exodus 23:20-33** saying, “Do not adopt their religious practices.” That was God's original plan. When the children of Israel were to enter the land of Canaan, they were to allow God to scatter the inhabitants ahead of them. Then, they were to represent God clearly and well enough so that some of those former inhabitants would be drawn to worship the true God. But, the children of Israel were not happy with that

approach. They wanted to conquer their enemies with **their swords and spears** so that **they** would get the credit for conquering. They were not willing to let God do it for them. So, finally, God effectively said: “Okay, do it your way.” (See **Deuteronomy 20:16-18**.) “Kill everyone.” And why did God tell them that? God said that it was: “So that they will not make you sin against the LORD by teaching you to do all the disgusting things that they do in the worship of their gods.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup> So, God’s purpose in both of those commands was to destroy the false forms of worship that permeated the land of Canaan. He knew that if the children of Israel allowed those peoples to continue worshiping their false fertility cult religions, the children of Israel would be attracted to them and eventually would be overcome by them. And, unfortunately, that is exactly what happened.

27. Often, the New Testament will give explanations of things in the Old Testament that are much more consistent with what we believe were God’s original intentions. Consider the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus’s contrast between the Old and the New. (Matthew 5-8) Jesus was simply expanding the Old Testament ideas.
28. We must also recognize that there were still many things that Christ wished He could have told His disciples; but, they were not yet ready for it.

**John 16:12:** [Jesus said:] “**I have much more to tell you, but now it would be too much for you to bear.**”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

**The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God’s mode of thought and expression.** It is that of humanity. **God, as a writer, is not represented.** Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. **The writers of the Bible were God’s penmen, not His pen.** Look at the different writers.

**It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man’s words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts.** But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God.—Manuscript 24, 1886 (written in Europe in 1886).—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,<sup>\*</sup> Book 1, 21.1-2.<sup>†</sup> Compare *SDABC*, vol. 7, 849.9.

29. When Daniel saw that statue in the vision, he had to explain it in words we can understand.
30. So, how many of us have spent enough time with Scripture and continue to do so on a daily basis so that we have clearly in mind the overall message of the great controversy as presented in Scripture? There are many passages in Scripture that cannot be understood without an understanding of the great controversy over God’s character and form of government and Satan’s attempts to misrepresent God in every way he possibly can. How many of our young people understand the great controversy?
31. Another simple example of a problem that raises questions is Luke 23:43.

**Luke 23:43:** And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise.—*The Holy Bible: King James Version*.<sup>\*</sup> (2009). (Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version., Luke 23:43). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

32. In the *King James Version*, Jesus seemed to have promised the thief on the cross that he would be in paradise with Him that very day. The first thing we need to recognize is that there was no punctuation in the original Greek of this passage or other passages. So, it is

the translators and interpreters who decided where to put the comma. If we are to stay with the *King James Version*, the simple solution is to move the comma to after the words *to day*. Thus, it could be: “Jesus said, ‘I say unto thee to day [today], thou shalt be with me in paradise.’”<sup>†</sup> But, there are other reasons why we should choose to move that comma.

**John 20:17:** “Do not hold on to me,” Jesus told her, “because I have not yet gone back up to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am returning to him who is my Father and their Father, my God and their God.”—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*</sup>

See the story in *Desire of Ages* 788-790.

33. Even if the usual understanding of what happens at death were true, the thief did not die that day! So, he could not have been with Jesus in some paradise that day! Furthermore, if heaven is what Jesus meant when He said *paradise*, Jesus Himself said on Sunday that He had not yet ascended to His Father in heaven! (John 19:31-33; 20:17)
34. If we are careless and lazy and try to brush over difficult passages in Scripture, we may develop such a habit of doing that; and, therefore, we may brush over large portions of Scripture. We need to change our thinking to agree with Scripture rather than trying to re-interpret Scripture to agree with our thinking.

Some difficulties defy easy and quick answers. They require determination and patience. For centuries, scholars had been puzzled over one of the most perplexing discrepancies in Scripture: the disparate numbers of the reigns of the Hebrew kings in the Old Testament. The Bible provides much information about these kings, but when the information is put together, it seems contradictory. [The time periods as presented in Kings do not seem to fit with the time periods as presented in Chronicles.] **It would have been easy for Adventist scholar Edwin Thiele to accept this unsolved discrepancy as a given. But because he believed in the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture, he was determined not to give up and for years studied all the evidence. By carefully studying the biblical data and comparing it with extra-biblical sources, he finally was able to show that different methods were used to count the years in the reigns of the Hebrew kings. His solution is consistent with the scriptural record and the records of other nations of the ancient world. His book *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983) has become a standard work that is widely recognized in scholarly circles, far beyond the borders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*\* 161.<sup>†‡§</sup>**

Note that the University of Chicago was started by a donation to Baptists.

35. Are we capable of setting aside our prejudices and our pet theories when we read the Bible? Daniel was given a vision which perplexed him and troubled him for years. (See Daniel 8.) Finally, after an honest and lengthy period of time of praying to God, the answer was given to him; it is one of the most important passages of Scripture. (Daniel 9) Are we prepared to allow God to do that for us? Or, are we going to demand that we have the answers that we want right now? We live in a society that wants instant gratification!

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