

# ***How to Interpret Scripture*** ***By Scripture Alone—Sola Scriptura***

Lesson #5 for May 2, 2020

Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 4:1-6; Titus 1:9; 2 Timothy 1:13; Mark 12:10,26; Luke 24:27,44-45; Isaiah 8:20; Hebrews 4:12.

1. The rousing cry of the Protestant reformation was *sola Scriptura* or “Scripture alone.” Thus, Protestants were rejecting the traditions which the Roman Catholic Church had added and which in their opinion often superseded the importance of Scripture!
2. Often in those days, priests gave allegorical interpretations of Scriptures that had no obvious connection to the text as read from the Bible. So, Protestant reformers insisted that the text should be read to mean what the words obviously seemed to imply in ordinary language. Does that sound reasonable?
3. What does the idea of *the Bible alone* or *the Scripture alone* or *sola Scriptura* imply? Seventh-day Adventists have also held strictly to the idea that the Scriptures alone are our basis for faith and practice. This does not mean that we deny religious experience, human reason, or correct tradition; however, these must be subservient to the Bible itself.
4. Often, we may find that considering other sources such as lexicons, dictionaries, concordances, or other books about the Scriptures may help us understand the Scriptures. However, the Scriptures themselves must ultimately serve as top priority. And finally, if there appears to be a conflict, the Scriptures must, ultimately, give us the final answer.

“Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.”—Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II*, eds. Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 11, 12.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Sunday, April 26].<sup>†§</sup>

5. Can you think of an experience from a biblical story that illustrates what we are suggesting?

**Acts 17:10-11:** <sup>10</sup> As soon as night came, the believers sent Paul and Silas to Berea. When they arrived, they went to the synagogue. <sup>11</sup>The people there were more open-minded than the people in Thessalonica. They listened to the message with great eagerness, and every day they studied the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true.—American Bible Society. (1992). *The Holy Bible: The Good News Translation\** (2nd ed., Acts 17:10–11). New York: American Bible Society.

**What we believe in matters of faith is true only if our beliefs correspond to the witness of the whole of Scripture, to all of Scripture (*tota Scriptura*). This precept implies the unity of Scripture and the premise that the Bible is sufficiently clear in what it states.—*Adult Teachers Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** 65.<sup>†§</sup>**

6. Making the claim that we follow *sola Scriptura* does not mean *solo Scriptura* or

unaccompanied Scripture. We do not reject all other sources of information that might be helpful. However, the Bible stands above all others.

**But God will have a people upon the earth to maintain the Bible, and the Bible only, as the standard of all doctrines and the basis of all reforms.**

The opinions of learned men, the deductions of science, the creeds or decisions of ecclesiastical councils, as numerous and discordant as are the churches which they represent, the voice of the majority—not one nor all of these should be regarded as evidence for or against any point of religious faith. **Before accepting any doctrine or precept, we should demand a plain “Thus saith the Lord” in its support.**—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*\* 595.1.† [Can you support your beliefs from the Scripture?]<sup>‡</sup>

7. How do you understand these words from Revelation 22:18-19?

**Revelation 22:18-19:** <sup>18</sup> I, John, solemnly warn everyone who hears the prophetic words of this book: **if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to his or her punishment the plagues described in this book.** <sup>19</sup> **And if anyone takes anything away from the prophetic words of this book, God will take away from them their share of the fruit of the tree of life and of the Holy City, which are described in this book.**—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

8. While this is true about all of the Bible, these words were originally written only with respect to the book of Revelation. Can you imagine John saying this about his writings?
9. Why is it so serious to add or subtract something from the Scripture? If we choose to add to or subtract anything from Scripture, we are saying that some other authority has overruled Scripture. So, what are the implications of saying *the Bible and the Bible alone*?

**2 Peter 1:20-21:** <sup>20</sup> Above all else, however, remember that no one can explain by himself or herself a prophecy in the Scriptures. <sup>21</sup> For no prophetic message ever came just from human will, but **people were under the control of the Holy Spirit** as they spoke the message that came from God.—*Good News Bible*.<sup>\*†</sup>

10. What would happen if the Scriptures were not consistent and did not have a single “Author”? It would not be possible to compare Scripture with Scripture in support of doctrine; the Bible would become a disparate, confusing collection by different authors with different perspectives and with different ideas. It is only possible for the Scriptures to function as a theological guide and norm for our beliefs because of the internal unity of the Bible. That unity is not something superimposed on Scripture, but rather, it flows out of its coming from a single Author, the Holy Spirit.
11. This is demonstrated by the fact that, repeatedly, New Testament authors quoted from the Old Testament, sometimes at length, treating the words as if they were authoritative.
12. Compare Romans 3:10-18 with Ecclesiastes 7:20; Psalms 14:2-3; 5:9; 10:7; and Isaiah 59:7-8. What we see is that Paul, probably quoting from memory, gave us ideas from a number of different sources in the Old Testament to prove his point. Clearly, he regarded them as authoritative.
13. Many Christians in our day believe that they should show regard to and are responsible

only for the teachings of the New Testament. They believe that the tenor and ideas of the Old Testament are fierce, destructive, harsh, even unfriendly. But, those who really believe in *sola Scriptura* hold that the New Testament is an unfolding of the teachings of the Old Testament. **The New Testament and the Old Testament fit together like a single book with no contradictions throughout.**

14. This was a major “battle” in the early years after the destruction of Jerusalem. To the Jews living outside of Palestine, the Greek language Scriptures of the Old Testament, known as the *Septuagint*, were their national history; they claimed the right to interpret those Scriptures according to their understanding and needs. By contrast, the early Christians felt that the Old Testament should be interpreted in light of the New Testament and, in fact, that those two testaments were part of a total package and should never be studied alone.
15. So, what should we do with texts which appear to be in contradiction to each other? When texts seem to contradict, it is a challenge for us to consider all of the texts in Scripture that bear on the same topic; we will surely find that there is a consistency in the whole. There will, of course, always be texts that we cannot fully comprehend until we get into the better land; but, this should not discourage us from doing our best to bring all of the appropriate Scriptures together.
16. It should be obvious that if we are encouraged to compare Scripture with Scripture, the **Scriptures must be in harmony with each other.** If there is no unity in Scripture, it would not be safe to do so. This, again, has enormous implications for our study of Scripture which is the basis for our theology. In the minds of some of us, the most compelling reason for believing that there is no important difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is the statements of Jesus and Paul. Remember that Jesus’s most famous statement regarding the greatest commandment as found in Matthew 22:37-40 comes straight out of the books of Leviticus (19:18) and Deuteronomy (6:5). Furthermore, both Jesus and Paul made it very clear that Jesus Christ was the God of the Old Testament.

**John 5:39:** “You study the Scriptures, because you think that in them you will find eternal life. And these very Scriptures speak about me!”—*Good News Bible*.\*

**Luke 24:27,44-45:**<sup>27</sup> And Jesus explained to them what was said about himself in all the Scriptures, beginning with the books of Moses and the writings of all the prophets....<sup>44</sup> Then he said to them, “These are the very things I told you about while I was still with you: everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the writings of the prophets, and the Psalms had to come true.”

<sup>45</sup> Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.—*Good News Bible*.\*† [Jesus was saying that the entire Old Testament was about Him!]<sup>†</sup>

**1 Corinthians 10:1-4:** I want you to remember, my brothers and sisters, what happened to our ancestors who followed Moses. They were all under the protection of the cloud, and all passed safely through the Red Sea.<sup>2</sup> In the cloud and in the sea they were all baptized as followers of Moses.<sup>3</sup> All ate the same spiritual bread<sup>4</sup> and drank the same spiritual drink. **They drank from the spiritual rock that went with them; and that rock was Christ himself.**—*Good News Bible*.\*†

17. But, any appeal to the Scriptures alone would make no sense if it was impossible for us to understand the basic meanings of those Scriptures. Jesus repeatedly encouraged His audiences to look at the Old Testament and understand what was written there. See Matthew 21:15,42; 12:3,5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:10,26; 13:14; and Luke 6:3.
18. When considering the clarity of Scripture, it is probably honest to say that the most difficult texts to understand in the Bible are not those that challenge us because of their wording or ideas or because of our limited understanding. **The most challenging texts are probably those that we clearly understand but wish we did not have to follow.** Do we ever find ourselves trying to invoke some strange interpretation of Scripture so as to avoid the obvious meaning?
19. **This implies something else which is also very controversial. We must not limit ourselves to a version of the Bible that is in a language that we no longer use and is often hard for us to understand.** The *King James Version* of the Bible was initially written in the common language of the people of that time and has been updated repeatedly to try to make use of modern language. The *New King James Version* is one example of that. It is a great improvement over the original 1611 edition of the *King James Version* for someone living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But, we should also feel free to use translations produced by scholarly groups for modern readers. There are many available.
20. It is important to study the Scriptures, using a translation that we can clearly understand. God did not intend for our Bibles to be read only in an ancient language that is hard to understand and which no one is using in their ordinary speech each day!
21. In the Dark Ages, the Roman Catholic Church claimed to have an ecclesiastical *magisterium* which provided the correct understanding of the Bible. This meant that only the priests were the ones allowed to interpret Scripture according to their own ideas instead of making the Bible subject to the reading and understanding of ordinary people. Thus, Protestants began to speak of the priesthood of all believers. Study for yourself!
22. It has been aptly pointed out that:
- “The consistent example of the Bible writers shows that the Scriptures are to be taken in their plain, literal sense, unless a clear and obvious figure is intended. . . . There is no stripping away of the ‘husk’ of the literal sense in order to arrive at the ‘kernel’ of a mystical, hidden, allegorical meaning, that only the initiated can uncover.”—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), p. 65.—[as quoted in *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide\** for Tuesday, April 28].<sup>‡</sup>
23. Another implication that it is important to recognize from what we have said so far is that **Scriptures interpret other Scriptures.** It is often surprising and amazing to study in some depth a passage which may seem difficult to understand by comparing it with other similar passages. Often, beautiful new truths become apparent.

**Romans 15:4:** Everything written in the Scriptures was written to teach us, in order that we might have hope through the patience and encouragement which the Scriptures give us.—*Good News Bible*.\*

**The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with**

**scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption.**—Ellen G. White, *Education*\* 190.2.<sup>†</sup> Compare *CT* 462.1; *LHU* 115.2. [Where did the great controversy theme come from?]<sup>‡</sup>

24. It would be wonderful if we were all scholars of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and could study the Bible in its original languages. But, fortunately, even online, for those who have computers available, it is often possible to see what the original words were. This is often helpful, and there are so many helps available today. However, we must be careful in trying to use such helps and then interpreting Scripture as if we did understand the original languages fully.
25. **Picking just one or two passages from Scripture to support some teaching without considering what the rest of Scripture says on the subject is fraught with real danger.** The famous evangelist, Billy Graham, loved to use the story of the rich man and Lazarus to talk about the nature of man and the state of the dead. (See Luke 16:19-31.) He intentionally chose not to mention other texts in the Bible that would have completely contradicted what he taught on that subject.
26. This brings us to a very important point for Seventh-day Adventists. **How should we relate to the writings of Ellen White.** For those who have made themselves somewhat familiar with her writings, **it is very clear that she felt that the Bible is foundational and central to our teachings and doctrines and to her thoughts and theology. See *The Great Controversy*, 595.1 as quoted in Item #6 above.**

For six thousand years that mastermind [Satan] that once was highest among the angels of God has been wholly bent to the work of deception and ruin. And all the depths of satanic skill and subtlety acquired, all the cruelty developed, during these struggles of the ages, will be brought to bear against God's people in the final conflict. And in this time of peril the followers of Christ are to bear to the world the warning of the Lord's second advent; and a people are to be prepared to stand before Him at His coming, "without spot, and blameless." 2 Peter 3:14. At this time the special endowment of divine grace and power is not less needful to the church than in apostolic days.—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*\* ix.4 (Introduction).<sup>‡</sup>

27. In her writings, **Ellen White repeatedly pointed people back to the Scriptures.**

You are not familiar with the Scriptures. If you had made God's word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the *Testimonies*. It is because you have neglected to acquaint yourself with God's inspired Book that He has sought to reach you by simple, direct testimonies.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 2, 605.1; *5T*\* 664.3.<sup>§</sup> Compare *LS* 198.1.

28. **Seventh-day Adventists have been incredibly blessed. No other group in history has had inspired records so complete and so readily accessible as we have. What are we doing with all that treasure?**

The student of the Bible should be taught to approach it in the spirit of a learner. We are to search its pages, not for proof to sustain our opinions, but in order to know what God says.

A true knowledge of the Bible can be gained only through the aid of that Spirit by whom the word was given. And in order to gain this knowledge we must live by it. All that God's word commands, we are to obey....

The study of the Bible demands our most diligent effort and persevering thought. As the miner digs for the golden treasure in the earth, so earnestly, persistently, must we seek for the treasure of God's word.—Ellen G. White, *Education*\* 189.1-3.

When you make the Bible your food, your meat, and your drink, when you make its principles the elements of your character, you will know better how to receive counsel from God. I exalt the precious word before you today. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, "Sister White said this," and "Sister White said that." Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands.—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*,\* Book 3, 33.1.

29. **Many of our Christian friends believe in doctrines which we know are not based on all of Scripture.** For example, the belief in the immortality of the soul and the belief in the sacredness of Sunday. As Seventh-day Adventists, are we prepared to give a clear Bible-based explanation of our teachings on those subjects? Can we do it in a kind and considerate way and not a rough, accusing way?
30. Finally, how should we feel about people who read a certain passage in Scripture, or perhaps several passages, and believe they have discovered some grand, new truth?

God has not passed His people by and chosen one solitary man here and another there as the only ones worthy to be entrusted with His truth. **He does not give one man new light contrary to the established faith of the body....** Let none be self-confident, as though God had given them special light above their brethren.... One accepts some new and original idea which does not seem to conflict with the truth. He ... dwells upon it until it seems to him to be clothed with beauty and importance, for Satan has power to give this false appearance. At last it becomes the all-absorbing theme, the one great point around which everything centers, and the truth is uprooted from the heart.... I warn you to beware of these side issues, whose tendency is to divert the mind from the truth. Error is never harmless. It never sanctifies, but always brings confusion and dissension.—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*,\* vol. 5, 291.2-292.2 (1885); *Last Day Events*\* 90.6-91.2.† Compare *Mar* 60; *CW* 45.2-46.2.

31. This lesson has some absolutely essential and important ideas that we must incorporate into our thinking and practice. Are we doing that?

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Last Modified: March 15, 2020

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