

20.06.2020 DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PASSAGES

And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation — as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things 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

What is a Bible difficulty? A Bible difficulty is an apparent problem posed by the Biblical record. It might be called an error, a mistake, a difficulty, a challenge, a contradiction, or any number of other terms. Critics of the Bible are sometimes hostile in their claims that the Bible is “full of contradictions” or “difficulties,” but these apparent problems are also brought up by committed Christians wanting to make sense of God’s Word. Furthermore, many Christian leaders today do not accept the inspiration of Scripture and therefore often simply accept contradictions as part of a flawed record. But if the Bible is God’s Word, and if God is all knowing and all powerful, it stands to reason we should be able to trust the Bible.

‘If this Word is studied, not merely read, but studied, it furnishes us with a storehouse of knowledge which enables us to improve every God-given endowment. It teaches us our obligation to use the faculties given us. Guided by its precepts, we may render obedience to God’s requirements.

All who will come to the Word of God for guidance, with humble, inquiring minds, determined to know the terms of salvation, will understand what saith the Scripture. But those who bring to the investigation of the Word a spirit which it does not approve, will take away from the search a spirit which it has not imparted. The Lord will not speak to a mind that is unconcerned. He wastes not his instruction on one who is willingly irreverent or polluted. But the tempter educates every mind that yields itself to his suggestions and is willing to make of none effect God’s holy law.

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. The heart, the mind, the soul must be prepared to receive light. There must be silence in the soul. The thoughts must be ‘brought into captivity to Jesus Christ. The boastful self-confidence and self-sufficiency must stand rebuked in the presence of the Word of God. The Lord speaks to the heart that humbles itself before him.’ *Review and Herald. August 22, 1907*

Dealing with Difficult Passages: Honestly, Carefully and Humbly

When we study the Bible, even the difficult passages, we begin with the foundation that this is the revealed Word of God. The Holy Spirit reveals and illuminates our minds with what God intended us to understand from the written Word. We too have a role to play – we are called to diligent and disciplined study of the Word, humbling ourselves before God.

The principles for dealing with difficult passages are the same as reading straightforward Bible passages:

1. Approach the study of the Word with humility and reverence.
2. Pray for the Holy Spirit to give wisdom to understand the Word.
3. Persist in study and prayer; diligent study takes TIME.
4. Do not try to interpret difficult passages according your preconceptions.
5. Do not be judgmental about the Word; instead, submit to it conscientiously; obey what is clear.
6. While spiritual teachers have a role in helping our understanding of Scripture, we should not become dependent on them for our understanding of God’s Word... *“but you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.” Matthew 10:8-10*

‘Those who allow prejudice to bar the mind against the reception of truth cannot receive the divine enlightenment. **Yet, when a view of Scripture is presented, many do not ask, Is it true--in harmony with God’s word? but, By whom is it advocated? and unless it comes through the very channel that pleases them, they do not accept it.** So thoroughly

satisfied are they with their own ideas that they will not examine the Scripture evidence with a desire to learn, but refuse to be interested, merely because of their prejudices.' EGW: Testimonies to Ministers. P 106

"Do you not yet perceive nor understand? Is your heart still hardened? Having eyes, do you not see? And having ears, do you not hear?" Mark 8:17, 18

"I do not want you to be ignorant" 1 Corinthians 12:1

"From the first day that you set your heart to understand, and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard." Daniel 10:12

Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things. 2 Timothy 2:7

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Hebrews 11:6

The Spirit of truth...will guide you into all truth. John 16:13

Apparent Contradictions

If we are honest, we recognise that there are apparent contradictions in the Bible. But many of these can be cleared up as we study. An important feature in studying the Bible is to know what the original Hebrew and Greek text say. Many apparent difficulties can be cleared up by doing this. We also need to recognise that some passages only become clear with time e.g. the prophecies of Daniel.

A well known example is the apparent discrepancy in the genealogy of Jesus as written by Matthew and Luke. Scholars now recognise that the genealogy in Matthew is that of Jesus' legal father, Joseph and the genealogy in Luke is that of Mary, his mother, through whom He can accurately be called 'the Son of Man'.

Another example is the great battle of the medieval church and the Reformers over the word 'Justify'. The latter taught that it meant 'to declare righteous' but the former said it meant 'to make righteous'. The Reformers used two texts 'the tax collectors justified God' Luke 7:29 (obviously they could not make God righteous) and 1 Timothy 3:16...'Christ was justified in the Spirit' to argue their case.

One of the most argued over texts in Christendom is Daniel 8:14...*unto 2300 days and then shall the sanctuary be cleansed (justified, vindicated).*

'How shall we search the Scriptures in order to understand what they teach? We should come to the investigation of God's word with a contrite heart, a teachable and prayerful spirit. **We are not to think, as did the Jews, that our own ideas and opinions are infallible;** nor with the papists, that certain individuals are the sole guardians of truth and knowledge, that men have no right to search the Scriptures for themselves, but must accept the explanations given by the fathers of the church. **We should not study the Bible for the purpose of sustaining our preconceived opinions, but with the single object of learning what God has said.**

Some have feared that if in even a single point they acknowledge themselves in error, other minds would be led to doubt the whole theory of truth. Therefore they have felt that investigation should not be permitted, that it would tend to dissension and disunion. But if such is to be the result of investigation, the sooner it comes the better. **If there are those whose faith in God's word will not stand the test of an investigation of the Scriptures, the sooner they are revealed the better; for then the way will be opened to show them their error. We cannot hold that a position once taken, an idea once advocated, is not, under any circumstances, to be relinquished. There is but One who is infallible--He who is the way, the truth, and the life.'** EGW: Testimonies to Ministers. P 105

Deal With Difficulties Scripturally and Prayerfully

These (Bereans) were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Acts 17:11

As we deal with difficult passages, **it is important not to manipulate Scripture** to suit our own ideas of what it should say. One of the criticisms aimed at Christians by those who know what a high view of Scripture we take, is that “you can make the Bible mean anything you like.”

But the New Testament itself condemns those who “distort the word of God” and twist it to suit their own purposes (2 Corinthians 4:2; 2 Peter 3:16). If we are scrupulously honest in our approach to the Bible and in our use of sound principles of interpretation, far from manipulating Scripture, we will allow Scripture to control and direct us.

The story is told of Mary, Queen of Scots, an ardent Roman Catholic, who, when she met the Protestant Reformer, John Knox, said to him, “Ye interpret the Scriptures in one manner, and they in another; whom shall I believe, and who shall judge?” John Knox replied: “Believe God, that plainly speaketh in his Word: and further than the Word teacheth you, ye shall neither believe the one nor the other. The word of God is plain in itself; and if there appear any obscurity in one place, the Holy Ghost, which is never contrarious to himself, explains the same more clearly in other places.”

‘Disguise it as they may, the real cause of doubt and scepticism, 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. And all who come in this spirit to the study of the Bible will find abundant evidence that it is God’s word, and they may gain an understanding of its truths that will make them wise unto salvation.

Christ has said, “If any man wills to do His will, he shall know of the teaching.” John 7:17, R.V. Instead of questioning and cavilling concerning that which you do not understand, give heed to the light that already shines upon you, and you will receive greater light. By the grace of Christ, perform every duty that has been made plain to your understanding, and you will be enabled to understand and perform those of which you are now in doubt.’ *Steps to Christ: What to do with Doubt.*

I have more understanding than all my teachers, for Your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I keep Your precepts. Psalm 119:99, 100

Additional Note:

John Stott on Difficulties in Bible interpretation

What shall we do with the problems? To accept the divine origin of the Bible is not to pretend that there are not problems. To be candid, there are many problems—literary, historical, theological and moral. So what shall we do with them? Is it compatible with intellectual integrity to accept the unique authority of Scripture when so many residual problems remain? Yes indeed it is.

We need to learn to do with the problems surrounding Scripture exactly what we do with the problems surrounding any other Christian doctrine. Every Christian doctrine has its problems. No doctrine is entirely free of them. Take as an example the doctrine of the love of God. Every Christian of every conceivable hue believes that God is love. It is a fundamental Christian doctrine. To disbelieve this would be to disqualify oneself as a Christian. But the problems surrounding the doctrine are massive. What, then, do we do when someone brings us a problem touching God’s love, a problem of evil or of undeserved suffering, for instance? In the first place, we shall wrestle with the problem and may be granted some fresh light on it. But we are not likely to solve it altogether. So then what? Must we abandon our belief in the love of God until we have solved all the problems?

No. We shall maintain our belief in the love of God, in spite of the problems, for one reason and for one reason only, namely that Jesus Christ taught it and exhibited it. That is why we believe that God is love. And the problems do not overthrow our belief. **So with Scripture. Someone brings us a problem, or we stumble across one ourselves, maybe an apparent discrepancy or a question of literary criticism. What shall we do?** To begin with, it is essential that we wrestle honestly with biblical problems. It is not Christian to bury our heads in the sand, pretending that no problems exist. Nor is it Christian to manipulate Scripture in order to achieve a forced, artificial harmonization. **No, we work at the problems with intellectual integrity.** During this process (as I can testify from my own experience) some problems, which at first seemed intractable, are satisfactorily solved. To others, however, we can see no immediate solution. So then what? **Must we abandon our belief in the Word of God until we have solved all the problems? No. We shall maintain our belief in God's Word, just as we maintain our belief in God's love, in spite of the problems, ultimately for one reason and one reason only, namely that Jesus Christ taught it and exhibited it...**To follow Christ is always sober, humble, Christian realism.

From: Understanding the Bible: the Authority of the Bible
