

VISION FORWARD



HOW TO HANDLE THE DIFFICULT PLACES IN SCRIPTURE

2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”

It is a learned joy of the Christian to read and study the Scriptures on a regular basis, and to grow in our knowledge of God and His ways. Regular reading and study is not an easy habit to establish, but one we are encouraged in by the examples of Jesus and the Apostles. Jesus often responded to challenges and questions by quoting the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Bible studying brings great rewards in terms of understanding Jesus and this ‘new way’ of life we have embarked upon.

From time to time though, in our reading of Scripture, we run into a portion or a verse that is very hard to understand, perhaps confusing or even sometimes downright offensive to us. Given the fact that most of us don’t have the time, or even the resources to become academic Biblical scholars

what are we to do?

As a chess player, one of the things I do to help my game and my thinking process is to use a tool for chess puzzles. In these puzzles you are given a seemingly impossible position in which to find a series of moves that will give you an advantage or a checkmate. Working through these puzzles definitely improves my thinking and makes my game stronger. Let’s apply that to Scripture reading. Let’s begin to see the difficult spots as a puzzle to better understand what God is saying.

I’d like to take us through two puzzling portions of the Scriptures that I have encountered recently and see if we can come to some kind of grip on them and understand what the meaning is for us, *and most importantly*, how we can navigate such passages in future studies. Are there principles or rules we as student “workmen and women of the Word” can follow?

1. In Luke 16:1-8, we have the parable of Jesus concerning the Unrighteous Steward:

Now He was also saying to the disciples, "There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions."² "And he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.'³ "The manager said to himself, 'What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg.'⁴ 'I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from the management people will welcome me into their homes.'⁵ "And he summoned each one of his master's debtors, and he began saying to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?'⁶ "And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'⁷ "Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' He said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

⁸ "And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light."

Is Jesus here actually commending the dishonest behavior of the steward?

Generally, we find the parable of the unjust steward hard to explain because of the **seeming** praise given to the dishonest steward (v. 8). But this parable is not to be understood symbolically. It is a basic rule in the interpretation of parables that no effort should be made to read some special meaning into every detail. **Jesus made this parable only to illustrate one precise truth**, the one He points out in vs. 8–14. [read through the section 16:8-14] Jesus did not commend the dishonesty of the steward (v. 8). He only commended the deep truth that all who would be His disciples must be characterized by wisdom in their preparation for the life to come. That we should take diligent and fast action to arrange our lives in preparation for the life to come. Repentance and life transformation in view of eternity.

Jesus found in the master's commendation of his unjust steward something beneficial to teach His disciples. The rich man did not condone his steward's dishonesty. For it was for dishonesty that

he was being let go of his position. **But he was praised for the shrewdness with which he advanced his career.** He was commended for the diligence with which he planned out his way of escape. His "wisdom," consisted basically in the diligent [swift] use he made of present opportunities while they lasted. **Jesus is indicating that people who live entirely for this life often show more seriousness in their pursuit of what it has to offer than Christians do in their preparation for the life to come.**

Christians should have a great zeal "according to knowledge" (Romans 10:2). They must have a true sense of the honor and glory that awaits them (Matthew 6:24–34). Unlike the unjust steward, they should seize every present opportunity in this life while it lasts to get ready for heaven.

Do not misinterpret this parable. When he found out he was going to be fired, this steward took the debtors bills and reduced, or eliminated, the amount owed to him. Thereby currying favor with these debtors in the hopes that one of them may hire him due to his perceived "generosity."

The 'parable' of this parable is; if you want to interpret the text correctly, you must read it from the perspective of the peoples who lived there in that time. This is a critical principle in reading and understanding Scripture. The Bible cannot mean for us what it did not mean for those to whom it was written. We must bring the 'then and there' into the 'here and now', but with an understanding of the impact of the words on the original audience.

2. In Judges 19-20 we have the very strange story of the concubine violated by the Benjamites, and the very strange response of her husband:

Judges 19:20 - 30 *The old man said, "Peace to you. Only let me take care of all your needs; however, do not spend the night in the open square."²¹ So he took him into his house and gave the donkeys fodder, and they washed their feet and ate and drank.²² While they were celebrating, behold, the men of the city, certain worthless fellows, surrounded the house, pounding the door; and they spoke to the owner of the house, the old man, saying, "Bring out the man who came into your house that we may have relations with him."²³ Then the man, the owner of the house, went out to them and said to them, "No, my fellows, please do*

not act so wickedly; since this man has come into my house, do not commit this act of folly. ²⁴ *"Here is my virgin daughter and his concubine. Please let me bring them out that you may ravish them and do to them whatever you wish. But do not commit such an act of folly against this man."* ²⁵ *But the men would not listen to him. So the man seized his concubine and brought her out to them; and they raped her and abused her all night until morning, then let her go at the approach of dawn.* ²⁶ *As the day began to dawn, the woman came and fell down at the doorway of the man's house where her master was, until full daylight.* ²⁷ *When her master arose in the morning and opened the doors of the house and went out to go on his way, then behold, his concubine was lying at the doorway of the house with her hands on the threshold.* ²⁸ *He said to her, "Get up and let us go," but there was no answer. Then he placed her on the donkey; and the man arose and went to his home.*

²⁹ *When he entered his house, he took a knife and laid hold of his concubine and cut her in twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout the territory of Israel.*

³⁰ *All who saw it said, "Nothing like this has ever happened or been seen from the day when the sons of Israel came up from the land of Egypt to this day. Consider it, take counsel and speak up!"*

Why would a man cut his murdered wife into pieces and send the parts throughout the land of Israel?

The Book of Judges is a book far more complicated than it may at first seem. We need to approach this book of Israel's history with the writings of Moses in mind. In Judges, Israel is in the promised land but there is no king or central government. Each of the tribes relates to the other in an alliance of common blood, but the conduct of the people begins a very tragic cycle of sinful behavior - God handing them over to their enemies - they cry out to God in repentance - God sends a judge to deliver them - they enjoy a period of peace - they revert to sinful ways.

A careful reader will note that the cycle is a growing downward spiral, each low getting worse than the one before it. The judges called into service are more and more flawed.

Here at the end of the book the men of Gilead commit an act of great and lewd violence against a man and especially his concubine/wife. The act was very much like the act of the men of Sodom. In other words, the Israelite men of the tribe of Benjamin are at the point of behaving identical to the Canaanites that God despised. The man taking his wife's body and cutting it up and sending the pieces around to the other tribes was a means of drawing a very graphic summons for justice, that quickly caused the ire of the other tribes to arise and make war with the men of Benjamin to punish them both for the incidents and allowing the men who did it to live with impunity among them (see Judges 20:1-7). A great evil was now loose among them and they acted to deal with it. This mutilation was a drastic act pointing out the heinous nature of what an innocent person had suffered under a supposedly godly nation, an exception and not a common practice.

There are any number of seeming 'problems' in the Scriptures that can puzzle us, but with patience and a growing experience all will be seen to have a reasonable and understandable solution.

And lastly for our consideration here are **some principles for studying and understanding Scripture:**

1. Seek, knock, ask

When you come to a spot that is not easy to understand, determine to find out, determine to pursue the Word until you understand. Don't be lazy and give up or give in but press on to find an answer and an understanding.

Proverbs 25:2 "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter, But the glory of kings is to search out a matter." **Matthew 7:7** "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

2. Prayer is essential. The Holy Spirit as Interpreter. (1 Corinthians 2:12-16)

A Christian must ask for the help of the Holy Spirit to understand that which is written by the "inspiration" of the Holy Spirit. Seems like a simple understanding but it is the most overlooked principle of all.

3. The Scriptures are meant to be understood, they are the revelation of God to man. (See the

article below by J.I Packer)

'Those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly set out and opened in another places of Scripture, so that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in use of the ordinary means, may attain to a clear and sufficient understanding of them.' Look for other places involving the same things.

4. The uniqueness of Scripture.

The scientific study of Scripture is a complicated and exacting task. The biblical languages have their own idioms and forms. Each writer has his own habits of mind, vocabulary, and outlook. Each book has its own character, and may be written according to styles which are not always easy to grasp. Each book has its own historical and theological background, and must be interpreted against that background. In some cases we are now continuing to learn of subtleties or the original languages and their translations.

5. The Scripture is best understood in light of other Scriptures.

The second basic principle of interpretation is that Scripture must interpret Scripture; the scope and significance of one passage is to be brought out by relating it to others. Our Lord gave an example of this when he used Genesis 2:24 to show that Moses' law of divorce was no more than a temporary concession to human hard-heartedness.

6. "Context is king".

Every text has a context in the passage from which it comes, its broader context in the history of the book to which it belongs, and its ultimate context in the Bible as a whole; and it needs to be rightly related to each of these settings if its character, scope and significance is to be correctly understood. Grasping the historical context and setting is an important element in untangling complicated parts of Scripture. What did it mean to them?

7. It cannot mean for us what it would not have meant to its original audience.

Scripture yields two basic principles for its own interpretation. The first is that the proper, natural sense of each passage (i.e., the intended sense of the writer) is to be taken as basic; the meaning of

texts for their original readers is the necessary starting-point for seeking it's meaning. In other words, Scripture statements must be interpreted in the light of the rules of grammar and discourse on the one hand, and of their own place in history on the other.

8. Be careful of the case you build. For example, Parables. Watch out if you come to a new understanding not found in other reference or source material. 'New Revelations' are 99.99% of the time in error. After 2,000 years with the New Testament and after 4,00 years with the Old Testament there are very, very few new interpretations.

9. The most likely of any two solutions is usually the simplest, shortest, or clearest. "Occam's Razor" = This is often paraphrased as "All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the right one." If our conclusions are more and more complicated, we are usually on the wrong path.

10. Become acquainted with available tools of Biblical information to help in unraveling puzzles. Reference books like commentaries, books with maps and timelines; even things like YouTube or other internet searches can be helpful. Just be careful of any of the sources. Are they from conservative Bible believing groups or cults of out of balance groups?

Asking your pastors is a great way to start. They will be certain to get you headed in the right direction, and LOVE to be 'bothered' answering and helping with questions about the Bible.

The Interpretation of Scripture by James I. Packer from 'Fundamentalism' and the Word of God (Inter-Varsity Press, 1958), pp. 101-114.

d. The Holy Spirit as Interpreter

One final point concerning interpretation remains to be made. Scripture tells us that if we are to understand Scripture we need, over and above right rules, personal insight into spiritual things. Scripture sets before us spiritual truths—truths, that is, about God, and about created things in relation to God; and to grasp spiritual truths requires spiritual receptiveness. But no man has this by nature. "The natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." The habit of mind which enslaves the

natural man, Paul tells us, is to set up his own “wisdom” and make it ultimate, and so he is compelled to dismiss as foolishness all that does not accord with it. Without spiritual enlightenment, he will never be able to see the foolishness of his own wisdom, nor the wisdom of the “foolishness of God” proclaimed in the gospel; hence he will never forsake the one for the other. Our Lord confirms this view of man. His repeated diagnosis of the unbelieving Pharisees was that they were blind, lacking the capacity to perceive spiritual realities; and He regarded spiritual perception, where He found it, as a supernatural gift from God.

Now, the Holy Spirit has been sent to the Church as its Teacher, to guide Christians into truth, to make them wise unto salvation, to testify to them of Christ and to glorify Him thereby. To the apostles, He came to remind them of Christ’s teaching, to show them its meaning, to add further revelation to it, and so to equip them to witness to all about their Lord. To other men, He comes to make them partakers of the apostolic faith through the apostolic word. Paul indicates the permanent relation between the Spirit, the apostles’ word and the rest of the Church in 1 Cor. ii.10-16. The Spirit, he says, gave the apostles understanding of the gospel: “we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God”; “God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit.” Now the Spirit inspires and empowers their proclamation of these things to other men: “which things we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches”; Paul preaches, and knows that he preaches, “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. And “he that is spiritual”—he in whom the Spirit abides to give understanding—discerns the meaning of the message and receives it as the testimony of God. This applies no less to the apostolic word written than to the apostolic word preached; and no more to the apostolic writings than to the rest of the written Word of God. The Spirit, who was its author, is also its interpreter, and such understanding of it as men gain is His gift.

Not that the Spirit’s presence in men’s hearts makes patient study of the text unnecessary. The Spirit is not given to make Bible study needless, but to make it effective. Nor can anything in Scripture mean anything when the Spirit interprets. The Spirit is not the prompter of fanciful spiritualizing, or of applications of texts out of their contexts on the basis of accidental associations of words. The only

meaning to which He bears witness is that which each text actually has in the organism of Scripture; such witness as is borne to other meanings is borne by other spirits. But without the Spirit’s help there can be no grasp of the message of Scripture, no conviction of the truth of Scripture, and no faith in the God of Scripture. Without the Spirit, nothing is possible but spiritual blindness and unbelief.

It follows that the Christian must approach the study of Scripture in humble dependence on the Holy Spirit, sure that he can learn from it nothing of spiritual significance unless he is taught of God. Confidence in one’s own powers of discernment is an effective barrier to spiritual understanding. The self-confidence of nineteenth-century critical scholarship was reflected in its slogan that the Bible must be read like any other book; but the Bible is more than a merely human book, and understanding it involves more than appreciating its merely human characteristics. God’s book does not yield up its secrets to those who will not be taught of the Spirit. Our God-given textbook is a closed book till our God-given Teacher opens it to us.