



2020 2Q How to Interpret Scripture: Lesson 12

Dealing with Difficult Passages

by Tim Jennings (announcements last page)

SABBATH

What makes a Bible passage difficult?

- When it is written in symbolism or metaphor—in other words when it is written in code and we don't know the proper key to decode it
 - Bible prophecies
- Taking literal things that are meant to be symbolic or metaphoric
 - The parable of the rich man and Lazarus
- Taking things symbolically or metaphorically when they are intended to be literal
 - The seven days of creation week as symbolic of periods of time
- Failing to understand one of the various contexts of Scripture (the immediate historical context, the prophetic context, the textual context, the Messianic context, the cosmic conflict context)

Examples:

- Immediate—Eye for an eye rule is in context of slaves coming out of Egypt, which would be understood as moving level one thinkers to level two, and placing a limit on retaliation—the strongest are not free to plunder whatever they want. And is instead seen as God's standard and therefore people either remain immature or have a punitive picture of God.
- Prophetic—splitting the last week of the 70-week prophecy of Daniel and putting it into the future for a future time for Israel to again sacrifice animals and be God's agents on earth
- Textual—Putting the comma in the wrong place in Jesus' conversation with the thief, or adding the word "man" to Jesus' words about drawing all unto Himself at the cross.
- Messianic—Misunderstanding God's actions in the OT when He acted to put some people to sleep in the grave as the war between Satan working to destroy the branch of the human family through which Messiah would come and God working to keep it open.
- Cosmic conflict—misunderstanding the entire purpose of the Levitical law and the OT sacrifices as having any actual literal salvation benefit.
- False premises or assumptions when reading the Bible
 - Humankind was created immortal and cannot die
 - Failing to understand God's design law and accepting the lie that God's law functions like human law
 - God must use power to inflict punishment for sin
 - God's justice is like human justice only knowing all the facts and being based on God's law



- Failing to study with the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit
- Using the Bible for purposes it was not given—to be authoritative on topics it was not written to enlighten upon
 - A rule book defining what is lawful or unlawful to do on the Sabbath
 - A justification for the subordination of women to men and wives to be governed by their husbands. Consider this historic quote and identify the design law being described:
 - *Few have correct views of marriage. They make light of this Heaven-appointed institution, and after it has been entered into thoughtlessly, without a true sense of its sacredness, the obligations it imposes are often shamefully disregarded. Ignoring the personal rights of women, the husband becomes unkind and authoritative. The individuality of the wife is submerged in that of the husband. She becomes the slave of his caprice and passions, as though she had naught to do but to obey his whims. He quotes texts of scripture to show that he is the head, and that he must be obeyed in all things, claiming that his wife must have no will separate from his. He acts the tyrant. But the same Bible that prescribes the duty of the wife prescribes also the duty of the husband. He is to be kind and affectionate, to love his wife as a part of himself, and to cherish her as Christ does His church.* 18MR 312.1
 - The authority on architecture, physics, electrical engineering, computer technology, aerodynamics, auto-technology, astronomy and many more fields of study. Rightly understood the Bible and science never contradict each other—but there are many fields of study the Bible is silent upon.
- Others?

What would be a good formula or general guide for studying the Bible and coming to accurate understanding?

- Start by humbling surrendering to God and asking for the Holy Spirit to enlighten the mind when studying Scripture
- Decide what one believes is the purpose of Scripture

“In His word, God has committed to men the knowledge necessary for salvation. The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. **They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience.** ‘Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.’” 2 Timothy 3:16, 17, R.V. GC vii.1

Is the Scripture given to be the authority on accounting practices, cartography, geography, surgical techniques, metallurgy, astronomy? Rightly understood Scripture and science never contradict, but science will give much greater truth or evidence in some fields of study than Scripture will, BECAUSE the Scripture was not given to enlighten in those fields of study.



But when it comes to salvation and character to development there is nothing that gives more light, truth, or insight than the Bible. So the primary purpose of Scripture is to reveal the truth about God, the sin problem and God's solution for it.

- Understand God's various design laws as revealed in Scripture and upon which God built reality to operate. First, that God's laws are design laws, not imperial rules. Second, how love actually functions, and then the other design laws.

“The same power that upholds nature, is working also in man. The same great laws that guide alike the star and the atom control human life. The laws that govern the heart's action, regulating the flow of the current of life to the body, are the laws of the mighty Intelligence that has the jurisdiction of the soul. From Him all life proceeds. Only in harmony with Him can be found its true sphere of action. For all the objects of His creation the condition is the same--**a life sustained by receiving the life of God, a life exercised in harmony with the Creator's will.** To transgress His law, physical, mental, or moral, is to place one's self out of harmony with the universe, to introduce discord, anarchy, ruin.” {Ed 99.2}

“God's healing power runs all through nature. [From where does this healing power come? It comes from God Himself. God is constantly dispersing of Himself, giving of Himself to sustain all His creation. God is the great source of life and all life flows out from God to His creation. This is the law of love built into all reality. But sin obstructs the flow of God's healing presence. Sin severs our connection with God.] If a tree is cut, if a human being is wounded or breaks a bone, nature begins at once to repair the injury. **Even before the need exists, the healing agencies are in readiness;** and as soon as a part is wounded, every energy is bent to the work of restoration. [Before Adam and Eve sinned God was already bent toward their salvation. Jesus the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world. Why? Because it is God's character and the nature of His universe to promote life, to heal injury, to restore from damage.] **So it is in the spiritual realm. Before sin created the need, God had provided the remedy.** [What kind of law is this?] Every soul that **yields to temptation is wounded, bruised, by the adversary;** [What? Notice not in legal trouble and under threat from God, but wounded, injured; then what is needed? A remedy to heal!] but whenever there is sin, there is the Saviour. It is Christ's work "to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, ... to set at liberty them that are bruised." Luke 4:18. Ed 113.1 [Notice the plan is for Jesus to heal, not Jesus to pay off His Father not to kill us.]

In this work we are to co-operate. "If a man be overtaken in a fault, ... restore such an one." Galatians 6:1. **The word here translated "restore" means to put in joint, as a dislocated bone. How suggestive the figure! He who falls into error or sin is thrown out of relation to everything about him.** [What is described here? What kind of law? Is the sinner described as being in legal trouble or actually out of harmony with reality, with God's design for life?] He may realize his error, and be filled with remorse; but he cannot recover himself. He is in confusion and perplexity, worsted and



helpless. **He is to be reclaimed, healed, re-established.** [What is the action to be taken, get legal pardon, or get healed, restored, renewed, regenerated, re-established?] "Ye which are spiritual, restore such a one." **Only the love that flows from the heart of Christ can heal.** Only he in whom that love flows, even as the sap in the tree or the blood in the body, **can restore the wounded soul.** Ed 113.2 [What is described? And where is the action? Is the love flowing from Christ to His Father to get the Father to act, or is the love flowing into the heart of the sinner to heal us? And what metaphor does the Bible use for this? The blood of Jesus—and where is the blood of Jesus to be applied? In our hearts to heal us. Yet, Christianity has accepted the lie that we are in legal trouble and has falsely interpreted the blood as a legal payment to God to stop God from killing us.]

Love's agencies have wonderful power, for they are divine. The soft answer that "turneth away wrath," the love that "suffereth long, and is kind," the charity that "covereth a multitude of sins" (Proverbs 15:1; 1 Corinthians 13:4, R.V.; 1 Peter 4:8, R.V.) - **would we learn the lesson, with what power for healing would our lives be gifted! How life would be transformed, and the earth become a very likeness and foretaste of heaven!**" Ed 114.1

If we don't understand God's design law, His character and methods of love, how love actually functions—if we replace God's design law with imposed law—then we apply Satan's methods and make the problem worse.

Right now in the USA there are all kinds of injustices, violence, hurt, taking place. Satan's way is to divide people into factions and see others who are not in "our" faction as the enemy, as the source of evil, abuse, mistreatment; to be outraged and angry at the injustice and then seek to make the others pay, to inflict some punishment upon them, to use Satan's methods of coercion and force and inflicted punishment to retaliate against them—and the divisions grow deeper, the hostility grows stronger, the violence perpetuates and people become hardened in hatred.

- We must know the context—the immediate context, but also the overarching context—that Scripture is telling one story and it all harmonizes. There is one human race, one sin problem, one originator of sin, one original human, one Creator God, and one solution to the sin problem. If we don't understand the larger context then we get caught in the immediate context and create all kinds of contradictions—like people being saved by animal sacrifices in the OT and by the blood of Jesus in the NT etc.
- We must understand the battle is not a physical battle over power and might, but a battle over ideas, concepts, methods and principles.
- The OT is primarily the story of God fulfilling His promise in Genesis 3 to bring the Messiah to save the human race. If we don't understand this context we will misunderstand much of Scripture



- Understand the Bible records real lives of real people who did real historic things, but many of those events are foreshadowing the Messiah or teaching larger realities in the plan of salvation.
- Scripture must harmonize with itself
- Scripture decodes itself
- God's character of love and design laws never change therefore our interpretations must never conclude God violates His own design for life or has a character other than love
- Jesus is the key to understanding God's truth. Jesus is the key to understanding God's character. Jesus is the key to unlocking the mysteries of the Jewish economy. Consider this historic quote:

The significance of the Jewish economy is not yet fully comprehended. Truths vast and profound are shadowed forth in its rites and symbols. **The gospel is the key that unlocks its mysteries. Through a knowledge of the plan of redemption, its truths are opened to the understanding.** Far more than we do, it is our privilege to understand these wonderful themes. We are to comprehend the deep things of God. Angels desire to look into the truths that are revealed to the people who with contrite hearts are searching the word of God, and praying for greater lengths and breadths and depths and heights of the knowledge which He alone can give. COL 133.1

But what if we teach the gospel is the good news that Jesus came to take our place under the condemnation of God and was killed by God in our place to pay or legal debt so that God won't kill us. And that if we claim to blood of Jesus as our legal payment then we get legal pardon in the books of heaven and God declares us to be legally righteous even though we remain unrighteous. If this is the gospel we claim, what will it do to how we understand Scripture? This is why the Scripture is poorly understood because people have accepted a false gospel which is nothing but paganism.

The true gospel is the good news about God Himself, His character of love, His design law of love upon which He built life to operate and that God has always been for us and constantly uses every agency at His disposal for our healing and restoration. Thus the gospel—the good news is found in Jesus. It is sin that destroys; it is God that heals and restores. And God so loved the world that He sent His only Son... to heal and save all who trust Him.

When this is the good news and we realize that if we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father, then we understand Scripture in a completely different way, a way that clears up many of the difficult passages of Scripture.



SUNDAY

The lesson is about Bible contradictions. I went online and here are what some people cite as Bible contradictions. How do you answer them?

- “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” — Exodus 20:8
- “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” — Romans 14:5

- “... the earth abideth for ever.” — Ecclesiastes 1:4
- “... the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up.” — 2Peter 3:10

- “... I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.” — Genesis 32:30
- “No man hath seen God at any time...” — John 1:18

- In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. John 3:3
- Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; Rev 1:7

- “... with God all things are possible.” — Matthew 19:26
- “...The LORD was with Judah; and he drove out the inhabitants of the mountain; but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron.” — Judges 1:19

- “...thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. ” — Exodus 21:23-25
- “...ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” — Matthew 5:39

- “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised.” — Genesis 17:10
- “...if ye be circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing.” — Galatians 5:2



- “Honor thy father and thy mother...”– Exodus 20:12
- “If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.” — Luke 14:26

What did you notice these critics were doing? They were being dishonest with the text. They did not seek to understand the meaning of the text, but sought to find texts to which they could apply a false meaning, a meaning that was not intended in order to create the appearance of contradiction. So, what we have revealed is the dishonest methods of the critic, not contradictions in the Bible.

You can see these same dishonest methods used all the time by those who hold false positions—they did this against Jesus.

Are there any texts in Scripture that you have struggled with that seem to be contradictory?

MONDAY

Dealing with difficulties honestly. I really like how the lesson said that it is better to simply say “I don’t know what that particular passage means” than to try and create a superficial interpretation that turns out later to be false.

Read 1Chronicles 29:17 “I know, my God, that you test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent. And now I have seen with joy how willingly your people who are here have given to you” NIV84

What does this mean? It means God is more concerned with an **honest heart that seeks** what is right, what is true, what is holy, than actually being right on a particular point or fact.

The Jews were right when Herod asked them where the Messiah was to be born—they knew it was Bethlehem, they were right on which day is the Sabbath, they were right on what foods were on the approved list, but being right on facts didn’t mean they had hearts that loved truth or loved God and loved people.

The Good Samaritan had a heart that was right—that loved others but as far as we know—did not keep Sabbath, eat kosher, pay tithes, sacrifice at temple—in other words this person would be doctrinally wrong—yet he was right with God. How is this possible? Because his heart was right.

Does this mean having a right heart means we have no responsibility for truth? No, just the opposite—those with right hearts not only love God and people—but they love truth and are eager to grow in truth as they are able to comprehend and understand it. But, we recognize that people come from different backgrounds, have different abilities, capacities, and not all of us will come to the same understanding of the facts—but the saved will all have new hearts that practice the principles of God—particularly love for others.



Will there EVER come a time in which any of us know all truth? No—we never become God all knowing, we never become infinite—we always remain finite. So, if we never know all truth does that mean there is always more to learn? And if we have more to learn, does that mean we could have some concepts, ideas, hypothesis, beliefs that are wrong even in heaven? For instance, could you decide to study advanced mathematics in heaven and get a complex equation wrong? And then rejoice when Jesus gives you the clue that allows you to understand it and get it right?

If we will never know all truth—what will all the save know and from which they will never be shaken?

Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. (John 17:3 NIV84)

What kind of knowing is this? This is not mere factual knowledge, this is experiential knowledge. We may know about George W. Bush or Barak Obama or Donald Trump—but how many actually know them?

The saved will know God—know His character, His trustworthiness, His methods and principles of truth, love, freedom. They will know this by experience and will identify with God and His methods such that the methods of evil, lies, coercion, fear, selfishness are repulsive—so that they would rather die than live in a universe governed by Satan’s methods.

Focusing on the heart allows us to have unity with those who have Godly hearts, even if they worship on a different day or eat different foods. But we don’t have unity with those in our own denomination if their hearts are not renewed, we instead have division.

Those who foster division in the church or society are those who refuse to focus on heart motive. We see this in the COVID pandemic. There has been and remains no absolutely right or wrong action to take in protecting people. The question is one of heart motive and principles—are the decision-makers seeking to help or seeking to hurt; are they understanding the principles involved; or are they seeking to advance themselves or use this as an opportunity to advance some other agenda or merely enforce rules regardless of consequence?

The mature look at the motive, realize the difficulty in the situation, understand there isn’t any clear-cut right answer and actions may change and even reverse course with new data, as facts unfold. The immature criticize changes in position and cite consequences that are less than ideal when they occur.

TUESDAY

The lesson talks about being humble and willing to be corrected or grow in our understanding.

This is a very good point—the mature are those who love truth but also recognize their own finiteness and are open to change their views when new truths are in evidence.



The immature lock themselves into a system of creeds or fundamental beliefs and refuse to change or update when new truth presents itself.

This is why the founders of the SDA church intended for the SDA church never to have a creed or a list of fundamental beliefs, but took the position that the Bible and the Bible alone is to be their creed.

The Bible, and the Bible alone, is to be our creed, the sole bond of union; all who bow to this Holy Word will be in harmony. Our own views and ideas must not control our efforts. **Man is fallible, but God's Word is infallible.** Instead of wrangling with one another, let men exalt the Lord. Let us meet all opposition as did our Master, saying, "It is written." Let us lift up the banner on which is inscribed, The Bible our rule of faith and discipline.—The Review and Herald, December 15, 1885. 1SM 416.2

But when we create a list of fundamental beliefs any challenge to that list of beliefs is considered to be an attack on orthodoxy, on God, and is alleged to be heresy. The ability to advance and grow is undermined or obstructed when we lock into a list of specific beliefs, rather than principles.

Consider this historic quote:

In every age there is a new development of truth, a message of God to the people of that generation. The old truths are all essential; new truth is not independent of the old, but an unfolding of it. It is only as the old truths are understood that we can comprehend the new. When Christ desired to open to His disciples the truth of His resurrection, He began "at Moses and all the prophets" and "expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself." Luke 24:27. **But it is the light which shines in the fresh unfolding of truth that glorifies the old. He who rejects or neglects the new does not really possess the old.** For him it loses its vital power and becomes but a lifeless form. COL 127.4

I would say this is nowhere more profoundly demonstrated than in understanding God's law—the truth of God's law being design law has not contradicted any truth of the past, but has advanced our understanding of the truth. But those who have refused to accepted the advancing light of God's law being design law, don't possess the old truths of God's law either, they instead operate upon the imperial law lie and misunderstand all law.

The bottom pink asks if truth is unfolding how can we striking the right balance between humility and certainty?

WEDNESDAY

Read first paragraph, "Real achievement..." What law is being described? The law of exertion—if you want to get stronger you must exercise.



Do we see how the Bible strengthens us as we study it? Do we see that we cannot develop skills of reason, discernment, problem solving if we never wrestle out problems?

Thus the mature are those who have developed by practice... Heb 5:14

Do we also see why the Bible presents many ideas that can be initially difficult to understand? Why? Because it reveals the truth of our infinite God for us to contemplate and think through and thus we grow as we study and advance in our acceptance of Bible truth.

But if the Bible was merely simple concepts with nothing complex or difficult to comprehend it would not only be limited in its ability to help us develop, but such simplicity would argue against an infinite God.

Read second paragraph, “The fact that you cannot...” This is another excellent point, and all people who take the view that difficult Bible problems cannot be solved undermine their own growth and development.

Others, however state the belief that some Bible problems are too difficult to understand as a psychological defense. They actually hold a belief which they are afraid to change, and thus really don't want to solve the apparent conundrum because the solution would require them to give up a cherished belief; OR they fear what might be thought of them for changing their view, or because they have preached or written a certain view in the past.

The mature are those who are able to say they are growing in truth and give up old ideas when better ones arise.

Read last paragraph, “When some difficulties...” this is another excellent point and reminds us of the metaphor of God's word being a lamp unto us

THURSDAY

Read second paragraph “If you do not understand...” This would be true only on matters of theology and God's principles for life—for matters upon which the Bible was given to enlighten us. It would not be true on matters for which the Bible was not given to enlighten us.

If one were to use the Bible only, can we make definitively case for a vegetarian lifestyle in this current world of sin? But, can we bring nutrition and health science to bear, harmonizing that science with Bible principles and make a strong case for a vegetarian lifestyle?

This is one example, of where science supports Bible principle to lead us to a healthy conclusion that the Bible alone does not definitively teach.

Any others?



FRIDAY

Read first paragraph, “In the Bible...” What of the idea that faithfulness to Scripture will respect the text rather than alter the text?

I really dislike paragraphs like this because what it suggests is that we are to take the Bible as it reads and if we don't we are not faithful to Scripture—but what they really mean is to take the Bible as *they interpret* it. They really don't mean that we should take the Bible for what it says.

Ask the authors about Deut 14, take tithe to buy fermented wine and rejoice before the Lord, whether we should we be faithful to Scripture here? I am confident they would have an interpretation that would cause us to not do it. In *The Clear Word* paraphrase it is changed from fermented to unfermented wine in DT 14:26, even though the Hebrew means fermented. I wonder if this was one of the places the lesson authors were referring to?

The problem is that translation requires interpretation and can have large variation, even of innocuous things.

Consider the following texts, first Genesis 28:18:

- And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows and set it up for a pillar...KJV
- Jacob got up early next morning, took the stone that was under his head, and set it up as a memorial. GNT
- Early in the morning Jacob took the stone he had placed near his head and set it up as a sacred stone. NET
- The next morning Jacob got up very early. He took the stone he had rested his head against, and he set it upright as a memorial pillar NLT
- Early in the morning Jacob took the stone that was near his head and set it up as a marker. Holman Christian Standard Version

So, was the rock used as a pillow, did Jacob rest his head upon it, or was it just placed near his head? Are we being true to the text?



ANNOUNCEMENTS:

September 17-19 2020: Dr. Jennings will be speaking at the AACC National Conference in Dallas, TX

October 3, 2020: Come and Reason will have a one day seminar in Chattanooga TN on Healing the Mind, Recovering from Sexual Abuse, the Impact of Digital Media on Kids and more. Details coming soon.

October 9-10, 2020: Dr. Jennings will be speaking at the Lakewood SDA church in Lakewood OH

November 6-7, 2020: Dr. Jennings will be speaking at an AACC River Conference at Plano, TX.
More info at <http://theriverconference.com/>