

## 12. Dealing with Difficult Passages (2Q 2020—How to Interpret Scripture)

**Biblical Material:** 2 Tim. 2:10–15, 1 Chron. 29:17, James 4:6–10, Gal. 6:9, Acts 17:11; 2 Peter 3:15, 16.

### Quotes

- When you are reading a book in a dark room, and come to a difficult part, you take it to a window to get more light. So take your Bibles to Christ. *Robert Murray M'Cheyne*
- Here, then, is the real problem of our negligence. We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy. *R. C. Sproul*
- It is clear that there must be difficulties for us in a revelation such as the Bible. If someone were to hand me a book that was as simple to me as the multiplication table, and say, 'This is the Word of God. In it He has revealed His whole will and wisdom,' I would shake my head and say, 'I cannot believe it; that is too easy to be a perfect revelation of infinite wisdom.' There must be, in any complete revelation of God's mind and will and character and being, things hard for the beginner to understand; and the wisest and best of us are but beginners. *R.A. Torrey*
- It is fashionable in some academic circles to exercise scholarly criticism of the Bible. In so doing, scholars place themselves above the Bible and seek to correct it. If indeed the Bible is the Word of God, nothing could be more arrogant. It is God who corrects us; we don't correct Him. We do not stand over God but under Him. *R.C. Sproul*

### Questions

What do we do with the tough parts of Scripture? How can we defend passages that seem to put God in a bad light? What should be our attitude to parts of Scripture whose interpretation is not agreed? How can we encourage others to trust in the Bible when they have doubts about it? Should we spend time dealing with Bible critics?

### Bible summary

We're told not to argue over words and to accurately handle to word of truth (2 Tim. 2:10–15). 1 Chron. 29:17 is part of David's prayer when the people presented their offerings to build the Temple. We need to come to God and his word with the right attitude (James 4:6–10). We're reminded not to give up (Gal. 6:9). "The people there had a better attitude than those in Thessalonica in that they were very quick to accept the word, and every day they examined the Scriptures to make sure what they were told was right." Acts 17:11 FBV. Peter complains that some parts of Paul's letters are hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15, 16).

### Comment

Some Bible passages are admittedly difficult. There are issues of different source texts, obscure words, confusing terminology. But these are not the most significant. The great challenges lie in passages whose meaning is apparently clear, yet where God looks terrible.

Some ask why the Bible is called the word of God when it has so much human fault and failing in it. What about the story of the Levite and his concubine—a horrific account of rape and murder, of betrayal and hatred and lust, that leads to civil war and genocide? What of Lot and his

daughters, a story of drunkenness and deception and incest? Or Abraham following the command to kill his son, the human sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter, the killing of the babies in Bethlehem? So much violence and death—sometimes directly attributed to the action of God himself: the death of the firstborn in Egypt at the hands of the Angel of the Lord, the destruction of 185,000 Assyrians, the drowning of all but eight in the Flood.

If the Bible was just God stating his nature and his salvation, then the Bible could be very brief. One could write a description of God ("God is love, God is righteous, God is the source of life" etc.) that would not need all the pages of the Bible's sixty-six books. Similarly a list of commands to be followed would be much shorter and simpler. Nor is the Bible intended to be a code book or recipe sheet. It does not give a set of instructions, a list of requirements to be performed so that we may achieve goodness, nor is it attempting to reveal some kind of secret knowledge that will provide illumination to some privileged elite.

It is very clear what the Bible is not. Yet it is claimed as the word of God. In what way? How do many of these disturbing accounts reveal God and His nature? In many ways, identifying the Bible as the word of God may seem very confusing, since it contains so much humanity. As King George V commented, "A wonderful book, but there are some very queer things in it."

Much of the Bible is story, and frequently told without comment. So often there are highly involved situations, yet we are not told who is right and who is wrong and what is the right path to follow. Here we see a hint that reveals God dealing with humanity in all its complexity. And we have to determine what God is saying through all this. Yet it may not be that the Bible is obscure, but that the evident meaning is disturbing and distressing.

In the words of Mark Twain, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

As with examples such as those cited above, the concept of the God of the Bible can be alarming. So what do we do with such problem passages? First we need to admit we don't have all the information in the way God does. Then we need to make sure we really understand what the passage is saying. After that we must look for reasons and causes. We take in text, context, background, language and all the rest. Plus the nature of the audience. But then we need to go to Jesus and read everything with the lens of his nature and character as the true revelation of God. Maybe we still have questions. But if we love God as shown by Jesus, then we can wait for a better understanding as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our loving God.

### **Ellen White comments**

The Bible is its own interpreter. With beautiful simplicity one portion connects itself with the truth of another portion, until the whole Bible is blended in one harmonious whole. Light flashes forth from one text to illuminate some portion of the Word that has seemed more obscure. {OHC 207}

Students are to be taught to understand that Book which should ever be represented as the book to study. The assertion that there are dark, mysterious, and incomprehensible things in the Word, things hard to understand, perplexing and uncertain, is a false one. Please read the first, second, and third chapters of Ephesians. . . . {SpM 131}

But while the teacher of truth should be faithful in presenting the gospel, let him never pour out a mass of matter which the people cannot comprehend because it is new to them and hard to understand. {Ev 201}