

How to Understand the Bible

BETWEEN MIDNIGHT and dawn on December 7, 1946, a terrible fire broke out in the fifteen-story Winecoff Hotel on Atlanta's famous Peach Tree Street. Before it was controlled scores of men, women, and children had died, but most of them were not actually burned to death. Trying to find a way out of the inferno, many jumped from high windows and died on the pavement below. Others were overcome with smoke as they groped from one exit to another for a safe way to escape. But for all, it was too late. They died trying to find a way out, seeking a way out, searching for a way out.

Millions of people today are searching for a way out of their dilemmas, their problems, their pain. This is the age of research in science, and of philosophy in daily life. People are looking for truth. They want to get ready for what is coming. Research is the key word. Both science and government are cognizant of the fact that tomorrow begins today. How can we get ready for what is before us?

Yet, with all this, confusion reigns in the minds and hearts of multitudes. They do not know where they are going, or which way to go. They are searching for a way out.

As one of the world's greatest preachers reminds us: "Either man began nowhere, and is looking for some place to go, or he began somewhere and has lost his way. In either case he is looking and searching." A good idea in our human predicament today is expressed in a sign seen in the rear window of an automobile, which read: "Don't follow me. I'm lost." As Carl Jung, an eminent psychologist, once said, "Man is an enigma to himself."

We hear voices crying, "Lo, here!" and "Lo, there!" But if men want certainty they should seek it, not in their own reason or logic, with its powers of induction and deduction; not in their

own common sense, intuition, conscience, or experience; not even in research or investigation—all proper in their place—but they should go directly to the Holy Scriptures to find what God has to say to men. They should seek it in that great Book which has stood the test of the ages.

In ancient times, when King Zedekiah was trying to defend Jerusalem, which was under military siege, he sent for the prophet whom he himself had locked up in a dungeon, and now secretly inquired:

“Is there any word from the Lord? And Jeremiah said, There is.”—Jeremiah 37:17.

In our day, when the heart of man is besieged by secularism, scientific atheism, doubt, and despair, the question comes, “Is there any word from the Lord?” Again the answer is clear, “There is.” God’s message to us today is found in the Holy Scriptures, and it is applicable to our time and to our needs. But how are we to understand the Scriptures? Listen to the claim that they make for themselves:

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”—2 Timothy 3:16.

One of the perils of our day is to depend solely on our inner impressions or intuition for spiritual light. But apart from God’s revelation in the Holy Scriptures, no man will ever come to the full knowledge of the truth. We need an infallible standard of truth and right; otherwise, we could never arrive at the truth. To those who believed on Him, Jesus said:

“If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed;

“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”—John 8:31, 32.

In order to know the real truth, we must test every idea by the written Word of God. Then we must follow explicitly what the Scriptures teach. If we are not willing to abide by their teachings, we are not assured of ever knowing the truth, for Jesus said:

"If any man will do his will [that is, God's will], he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."—John 7:17.

It is when we are willing to do whatever is revealed to us from God's Word, that He has bound Himself by promise to reveal to us the truth that we need. Our salvation and eternal destiny depend upon our knowing and following the light that is set forth in the Holy Scriptures. (2 Timothy 3:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; Isaiah 26:2.)

It is essential that we obtain a right meaning of the Scriptures themselves. In Christ's day there were great scholars who were well acquainted with the Holy Scriptures but put their own meanings into them and did not compare scripture with scripture, as they should have done. To them Jesus said:

"Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God."—Matthew 22:29.

It is easy for one to "wrest," or twist, the Scriptures to suit his own whims and views, as some did in Bible times. (2 Peter 3:15, 16.) The right meaning of Scripture brings to light the truth of God's salvation for us. The wrong meaning brings error and destruction. So it is important for us to know how to understand the Scriptures aright. Those who do not follow right methods of Bible study will be—

"Ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth."—2 Timothy 3:7.

Suppose we ask a few questions here. First: What divine aid is necessary in obtaining a right understanding of Scripture? The answer is in Luke 24:45:

"Then opened he [Jesus] their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures."

We need the help of the Lord in our study. The Holy Scriptures, or the Bible, as we often call the Word of God, is different from all other books. Men may master other books by the sheer power of intellect, but it takes more than application to understand the Scriptures properly. The Holy Bible is a spiritual book, and spiritual

things must be spiritually discerned, as we read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, where the apostle Paul declares:

“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

Christ opened the understanding of His followers that they might understand the Scriptures, as we have just read in the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke. It is clear, therefore, that the first thing to do in studying the Word of God is to pray the prayer that we find in Psalm 119:18:

“Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law.”

Surely, then, the Author of the Scriptures will enlighten us as to their meaning. We should pray not only that the Lord will open our understanding as we read and study His Word, but that He will help us to obey what we find therein. In this way God will be our teacher.

The next question is: What wonderful provision has our heavenly Father made that we might have spiritual understanding of His Word? For the answer we read Proverbs 1:23:

“Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you.”

If we turn away from evil, as far as we know anything to be wrong, and turn to God with all our heart, then we can expect the Holy Spirit to lead us into truth. We must remember that it was the Holy Spirit through whom God inspired the Holy Scriptures, for we are told in 2 Peter 1:21 that—

“Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost [or Holy Spirit].”

Certainly the Holy Spirit, the Inspirer of Scripture, would be our best teacher. Those who are continually surrendered to the will of God will be led by “the Spirit of truth” into “all truth,” as we read in John 16:13.

Another question: What should be our real

motive in studying the Holy Scriptures? The answer is found in Psalm 119:34:

“Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart.”

So we see that the primary requisite for a Bible student is that he should desire to know the will of God in order to do it. He should not search the Scriptures merely for proof of his opinions, but to learn what God says and then believe it and do it. Certainly no mere private interpretation without the guidance of the Holy Spirit is competent to explain the Scriptures, as we read in 2 Peter 1:20:

“Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scriptures is of any private interpretation.”

Sometimes people study the Bible merely to suit their own preconceived ideas. This leads some to explain away certain Scriptural commands and declarations that plainly contradict their own beliefs and practices. This is condemned as perverting the Word of God (Jeremiah 23:36), or handling the Word of God deceitfully. (2 Corinthians 2:17, margin.)

In order to discover the correct meaning of Scripture, we must compare spiritual things with spiritual. (1 Corinthians 2:13.) In other words, we should compare what the Holy Spirit has said in one scripture with what He has declared about the same subject in other scriptures. One text then becomes the key with which to unlock the meaning of another text or texts.

Let us give an example of this. In Luke 21:5-7 we read that some people asked Christ when the Temple in Jerusalem would be destroyed, and what sign would be given of the approach of the end of the world. We are not told here who asked this question. The record simply says, *“They asked him.”* But this text must be interpreted in the light of the parallel accounts in Matthew 24 and Mark 13. We turn now to Matthew 24:3, where we are told that it was Christ’s disciples who raised the question. And in Mark 13:3, 4 we discover that it was Peter, James, John, and Andrew. This illustrates how, by comparing scripture with scripture, the Bible explains

itself, and we can be sure that we are finding the real truth.

Here is another example in Psalm 50:3, 4, where we read:

“Our God shall come, and shall not keep silence.”

That this refers to the second coming of Christ is clear when we compare it with 1 Thessalonians 4:16, where the apostle Paul declares of Christ’s second advent:

“The Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God.”

So we see how “our God shall not keep silence” when He comes, because He will appear from heaven with a mighty shout, and the righteous dead will rise in the first resurrection.

The third example is found in comparing Isaiah 66:15 with Psalm 68:17 and Matthew 25:31. In the first text we read that “the Lord will come . . . with his chariots like a whirlwind.” The other two texts make it clear that the chariots of God are His angels, and that when the Saviour returns to this earth all the angels will come with Him.

So in this way we should let the Bible explain itself by rightly comparing scripture with scripture.

Here is an important point: The New Testament shows that Jesus Christ and His apostles interpreted and applied the Scriptures in a plain, literal sense unless the language was obviously figurative. From this we conclude that when a plain statement of Scripture makes common sense we are not to seek any other meaning. We are to take every word in its primary, ordinary, usual, and literal sense unless the context clearly indicates otherwise.

Another question that we might ask is: Do we base our understanding of Scripture on merely one text? And our answer is in Isaiah 28:9, 10:

“Whom shall he make to understand doctrine?

. . .

“For precept must be upon precept, precept

upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little."

In other words, if we wish to know the truth about certain religious subjects or Scriptural doctrines, we must bring together and carefully examine the various passages of Scripture that bear upon the subject. For instance, if we want to understand the true doctrine about the manner of Christ's second coming, we must not confine ourselves to one or two texts that speak of this, but gather together and consider other passages from the various books of the Bible that deal with the circumstances connected with His second coming. We should add point to point until all the texts are brought harmoniously together, giving a full revelation of the manner of Christ's return. One reason that there are so many discordant doctrines in the different churches today is that theories have been built up on two or three texts of Scripture without regard to the general tenor or teaching of the whole Book of God.

Question: What method of Bible study did the Lord Jesus use to confirm His apostles in the truth of His Messiahship—in other words, that He was the true Christ? In Luke 24:27-44 Jesus referred to a long list of Messianic prophecies from various books of the Old Testament pointing forward to the life and death of the Messiah who was to come. Thus He disclosed the truth to His disciples. This method of placing different prophecies together is called "line upon line; here a little, and there a little." Isaiah 28:10.

In Romans 3:9-18 we have an example of how the apostle Paul used this same method. Read the verses for yourself and you will see how he quoted from many places in the Old Testament to prove that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin, that all need a Saviour, and that we are saved through faith in Jesus Christ's atonement, and not through our own works.

To understand the Scriptures we must rightly divide them, as we read in 2 Timothy 2:15. To apply what is addressed to one set of people under one set of circumstances to some different set under entirely different circumstances, is fatal

to a right understanding of Scripture. For instance, Jesus used Isaiah 61:1, 2 as His text when He preached in His home town of Nazareth, as we read in Luke 4:17-20. As He read His text, He stopped in the middle of the second verse. Why? Because He was rightly dividing the Word of truth. He knew that the last part of that verse referred to a warning message about His second advent that would be preached 1900 years from that time. The first part of the verse referred to the proclamation of the first advent when He came to save sinners. If He had read the entire verse, He could not have said, "This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:21), because the last part of the verse was not fulfilled until many centuries later, just prior to His second advent.

Last of all, we ask this question: If we want to understand the true doctrine of the Holy Scriptures, what should be our attitude toward the truth? The answer is in John 7:17:

"If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself."

We quoted this text before, but we need to memorize it and remember it. He who is not willing to obey the truth will never see the truth. It is when we walk in the light that God has given that He will give us more light. Why should we be shown any more truth if we are unwilling to follow it? As a modern Bible teacher has said: "The ticket which will admit us into the temple of truth has three coupons on it, namely, a humble spirit, willing to listen to the Bible as a little child and be taught; second, an open mind, willing to let lifelong deeply rooted ideas go when the light coming in shows that we should; and three, an obedient life, willing to change and shape the daily habits of life to whatever the Book teaches."

We might add to these another coupon—a realization that the Holy Scriptures, from the first chapter of Genesis to the last of Revelation, are a revelation of Jesus Christ. His holy face looks out upon us from these sacred pages. He is

there revealed as the Promised Redeemer and Coming King, able to save unto the uttermost all who come unto God by Him. (Hebrews 7:25.)

So pick up the Holy Scriptures and begin to read them for yourself. Read them for your life—eternal life—as the very Word of God, with this prayer in your heart:

Break Thou the bread of life, dear Lord, to me
As Thou didst break the loaves beside the sea;
Beyond the sacred page I seek Thee, Lord;
My spirit pants for Thee, O living Word!

Bless Thou the truth revealed this day to me,
As Thou didst bless the bread by Galilee;
Then shall all bondage cease, all fetters fall;
And I shall find in Thee my all in all!

—Mary A. Lathbury

And, as you read the Word of God in this spirit, you will find it indeed the Word of the Lord “which liveth and abideth for ever.” 1 Peter 1:23.

Have faith in God—
 Be guided by His hand;
Have faith in God—
 Obey each clear command;
Have faith in God—
 Believe to understand.
Have faith, dear friend, in God.