

The Study of the Scriptures

If the Holy Spirit inspired the writers of the Scriptures to record accurately God's messages, and if God has preserved those messages so that they are still the authoritative revelation of His will, why are there so many different ideas about what the Bible teaches? The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, ensuring consistency of teaching throughout. Since the Bible is consistent it cannot teach, for instance, both that the seventh day is God's holy day, and that the first day of the week is His day. It cannot teach the total destruction of the wicked and an eternally burning hell. It cannot teach both salvation by Christ's grace and salvation by man's works.

The difficulty is not with the Book or with the provision God has made to help us understand its teachings; the problem is with men and with the way they approach the Scriptures. Neither the version of the Bible nor the language in which it appears will materially affect our conclusions regarding the Bible's teachings. The message of God is preserved in all versions or translations. And the Spirit of God is eager to guide all of us into right lines of thought. It is up to us to formulate and follow right principles of study if we wish to know what God teaches in His word.

Whether a chemist is developing an improved variety of printer's ink, or a wood preservative, or a fireproofing treatment for fabrics, there are clear-cut chemical procedures he must follow and safeguards he must exercise if he is to anticipate success. The physicist who is studying the mysteries of light, the one who is trying to harness atomic energy, or the one who is experimenting with earth satellites, observes the basic principles of science. The objective of each is not only to bring his own experiment to a successful conclusion, but to establish a pattern which others can follow to achieve exactly the same results.

There are not only basic procedures for the study of the Bible, but there are attitudes that are vital to an understanding of its message. It is because these procedures and right attitudes have been so often disregarded that we find many divergent views existing among men who all claim to believe the same Book. The methods of Bible study and the rules for its

interpretation are too large a subject for us to treat adequately here. However, each one should know some of the basic principles before beginning the study of the major doctrines. We shall think of them under six headings.

I. The Guidance of the Holy Spirit

Some of the numerous results of sin that will be discussed in a later chapter are the changes that have taken place in men's thinking. Minds have been blinded (2 Corinthians 3:14; 4:4), and corrupted (2 Corinthians 11:3) so that it is impossible for them to grasp spiritual truth without special enlightenment. One may know the facts about the Bible, about the principles of Christian living, and about God's plan for the future, but not understand the meaning of these facts. He may be able to explain the prophecies, and yet be unprepared for future events that will involve him personally. "But 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." 1 Corinthians 2:14. Man unaided by the Holy Spirit cannot arrive at spiritual truth. Paul urges: "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Romans 12:2. A change must come in our minds before we can decide what the will of God is and then act upon it.¹

There are at least two reasons for this inability of unaided human minds to grasp spiritual truth. One is the difficulty of conveying ideas by words. The other is that some things cannot be fully understood unless they are experienced—explanation is not enough. This is especially true in spiritual matters. One may be able to explain simply and clearly what is meant by conversion, but the person hearing the explanation cannot

¹ "The Bible should never be studied without prayer. The Holy Spirit alone can cause us to feel the importance of those things easy to be understood, or prevent us from wresting truths difficult of comprehension. It is the office of heavenly angels to prepare the heart so to comprehend God's word that we shall be charmed with its beauty, admonished by its warnings, or animated and strengthened by its promises. We should make the psalmist's petition our own, 'Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law.'"—*The Great Controversy*, pages 599:3 to 600:0.

"We should not engage in the study of the Bible with that self-reliance with which so many enter the domains of science, but with a prayerful dependence upon God, and a sincere desire to learn His will. We must come with a humble and teachable spirit to obtain knowledge from the great I AM. Otherwise, evil angels will so blind our minds and harden our hearts that we shall not be impressed by the truth."—*The Great Controversy*, page 599:1.

appreciate fully what conversion is until he is converted, even though he may be able to repeat to someone else the explanation that was given him. One may explain what prayer is, but until he has learned to pray his concept of prayer will be hazy.

The Holy Spirit's work is twofold: to lead us to understanding, and to lead us to experience. Shortly before His crucifixion Jesus said to His disciples, "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." John 16:13. Early in His ministry the Master had spoken to Nicodemus: "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." John 3:5, 6. Nicodemus, a leader in Israel, a good and wise man, could not at that time understand the meaning of the new birth. Even the Saviour's words did not make clear something that could be understood fully only by personal experience. The understanding we have of spiritual truth is the result of the twofold work of the Spirit.

The first step for the Christian in spiritually enlightening Bible study is to claim the fulfillment of Christ's promise of the Spirit to guide him into truth. The unfolding of truth is gradual, even for the born-again Christian. We cannot receive it all at once, for the Spirit continues to guide us as we persist in study and as spiritual growth takes place. No study of the Bible should take place before we have prayed. This need not always be a lengthy prayer; it may be a simple petition seeking the direction of the Spirit. In the private study of a topic or in the preparation for a class assignment the procedure should be the same. Ask for the presence and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and it will be given.²

II. A Right Attitude Toward Truth

In John 7:17 we find another basic principle to be considered in the study of the Scriptures: "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of Myself." "If any man will do His will" might be expressed "If any man wishes to do His will," or "intends to do His will," or "chooses to do His will." The person who sincerely desires and chooses to do the will of God will be enlightened to understand His will. He will be enabled to distinguish truth from error.³

There is a reason for the stipulation that a willingness to obey God's

² See *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, page 45:1.

³ See *The Desire of Ages*, page 459:1.

teachings is prerequisite to receiving light regarding Bible doctrines. There would be little purpose in God's making His will known to men and women if they have no intention of following it. God has spoken through the word to doubters who have read the Bible, and has led them to Himself; and He constantly speaks to unconverted men and leads them to the truth. But increasing light and understanding in spiritual matters is given to those who are determined to accept and put into practice the light received.⁴

Talking one day to a group of Jewish leaders, Jesus said, "Why do ye not understand My speech? even because ye cannot hear My word." John 8:43. They were listening to Him with their physical ears, but they could not "hear" His word. The next verse seems to be at least a partial explanation: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." John 8:44. While they were members of Satan's family, intent on doing his works, they could not "hear" the words of Christ, though they were diligent students of the Scriptures.⁵

As part of a prophecy of the latter days, there is in Daniel 12:10 a promise that those who study diligently and prayerfully will understand God's messages. This will not be true of the wicked, for "none of the wicked shall understand; but the wise shall understand." The psalmist wrote: "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant." Psalm 25:14. The word "secret" in this verse might be translated "counsel," "familiar converse." God has things to reveal to those who fear Him that will never be disclosed to others. Why should God reveal His deep truths to those who are not willing to follow Him?⁶

Coupled with this willingness to accept and apply the truth one learns

⁴ "Instead of questioning and caviling 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*, page 111:2.

⁵ See *The Great Controversy*, page 599:2.

⁶ "When a point of doctrine that you do not understand comes to your attention, go to God on your knees, that you may understand what is truth and not be found as were the Jews fighting against God. While warning men to beware of accepting anything unless it is truth, we should also warn them not to imperil their souls by rejecting messages of light, but to press out of the darkness by earnest study of the word of God."—*Testimonies to Ministers*, page 110:1.

in his Bible study, should be definite objectives of study. A casual reading of the Bible is not enough. General reading is good, but more than that is required to meet our needs. There must be concentrated study of verses, passages, chapters, books, themes, characters, and prophecies. We should have some objective in view each time we turn to the word of God.

III. Recognition of the Complete Harmony of the Scriptures

All Scripture was given by inspiration of God. "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." Consequently, if we understand the Scriptures correctly, they never contradict themselves. If a verse standing alone appears to be subject to two or more interpretations, the one to be accepted is that which accords most fully with the rest of the Biblical teachings on the subject.

When Jesus tried to enlighten two of His disciples regarding His mission, He appealed to all the Old Testament Scriptures. See Luke 24:27. Peter declared that all the prophets had given witness to Christ and His plan for the remission of sins. See Acts 10:43; 3:20, 21. Only complete harmony throughout the Scriptures would make it possible to gather information from all the prophets and set it forth in an explanatory discourse regarding Christ and the plan of salvation.⁷

No one passage of Scripture bearing on a theme can be properly considered apart from other passages bearing on that theme. A striking example is found in Revelation 14:9-11, where the punishment of those who receive the mark of the beast is described. They "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone," and "the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever." If this passage is taken by itself, one might come to the conclusion that the Bible teaches the doctrine of an eternally burning hell in which the wicked will suffer throughout eternity. But if we study other passages that speak of the fate of the wicked—such passages as Malachi 4:1; 2 Peter 3:10—we find a clear picture of the wicked not continuing to suffer, but being completely destroyed.

Since we acknowledge the complete unity of Bible teachings, we believe that these apparently opposed points of view are not actually contradictory. Revelation 14:10, 11 must be understood in the light of every other Bible verse that has to do with the destiny of the wicked. When so

⁷ "The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary."—*Gospel Workers*, page 315:2.

considered, it will be found to contribute to the complete picture rather than to introduce a discordant note. The problem of the punishment of the wicked will be dealt with in detail in chapter 59.

The Jews in ancient times built their hope on the coming of the Messiah to establish His kingship and to rule as conqueror over the whole earth. The Messiah is coming to set up His world kingdom; but the Jews failed to give comparable attention to the Bible predictions of the coming of the Messiah in humility to give Himself in sacrifice for the salvation of His people. Far from being contradictory, the two are parts of the same plan; but the sacrifice was to precede the kingship. Only by fitting together all of the pieces to form a complete picture could the two phases of the Messiah's work be understood. How would you understand Isaiah 53 if it stood all alone? or Daniel 2:44, 45? or Psalm 96:13? or Joel 3:9-17?

In all our studies of the fundamentals of Christian faith we shall follow the procedure of gathering passages on the topic from as many parts of the Bible as possible and considering each in its full context. Since our studies are not exhaustive, every text will not be included; but the ones we choose must be truly representative of the group. This should be true in all our investigation of Bible truth. Never pass by a scripture because it does not seem to harmonize with your concept of the doctrine. Study to discover just where that text fits into the whole. It belongs in the picture, and it is our responsibility to find out where.⁸

IV. Consideration of the Context

The word "context" originally came from words that meant "to weave." It has come to mean the words preceding or following a "text" or passage or word—the words with which the passage under consideration is woven or associated. The word "friend" brings an image to mind—a different image to each mind, possibly depending on the friend you have seen most recently or the one you consider your best friend. But when "friend" is used in a sentence the image may be an entirely different one. Abraham is called "the friend of God." Nancy is George's girl friend. John's friend gave up his trip to New York when John was hurt in the accident. The context helps to form one's present image of "friend."

Every passage of Scripture should be considered in its context if it is to be correctly understood. This is true of portions of verses, individual verses, and longer passages.⁹

⁸ See *Education*, pages 123:3 to 124:0.

⁹ See *Evangelism*, page 581:1.

°Read Acts 10:9-16. What is your impression as you read it? What does it appear to mean? Now read it again but read it in its setting—the whole chapter. Notice especially verses 28, 33, 34, 44, 45. Is your impression of the meaning of verses 9-16 different after you have read the context?

When talking with His disciples one day, Jesus made a statement which, standing alone, seems to be a misrepresentation of facts. See Matthew 16:28. °If you stopped at the end of that verse and considered nothing else, what would you conclude Jesus meant? Unfortunately, because this is the end of a chapter many people do make an unwarranted break in the account at that point and make no connection with what follows in the next chapter. Now read beginning with Matthew 16:24 and on to 17:8. When you see 16:28 as a part of the transfiguration record, the prediction is not only explained, but you can see that the verse makes an important contribution to the understanding of the *purpose* of the transfiguration (cf. 2 Peter 1:16-18).

Even a verse that seems to have such a general application as, “And ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13), can be more meaningful if studied in its context. °To whom was the message addressed? Under what circumstances? How does understanding the context make the verse more meaningful?

Context is often broader than a few surrounding verses or even a chapter. A series of chapters, an entire book, or even a period of history described in different books may have to be considered as a setting for a verse or a phrase. Without the setting the passage may be virtually unintelligible. Often the historical and cultural background is a key that unlocks a text. Isolate no passage. Take into consideration everything nearby or elsewhere that will assist you to see the passage in its true light. Try to discover the purpose for which the passage was written, and the relation of each part to the purpose or theme.¹⁰

V. Allowing the Bible to Be Its Own Interpreter

A prominent preacher once remarked in a nationwide radio broadcast, “Death to the wicked does not mean death; it means everlasting life in torment.” Often we are told that when John said, “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day,” he was referring to Sunday, because “everybody knows that Sunday is the Lord’s day.” There are many who always interpret “forever,” as used in the Bible, to mean “without end.” The fact that Christ is to come “as a thief in the night” is generally understood to

¹⁰ See *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, page 187:0.

mean that His coming will be unseen and unheralded. Are these accurate interpretations of these Biblical ideas?¹¹

These examples are mentioned here, not because we are going to take time to explain their meaning,—that will be done in later chapters,—but because they typify the results of a common mistake in Bible study. Ordinary usages of expressions and common understandings of terms are often adopted as acceptable interpretations of Bible words instead of allowing the Bible to interpret its own usage of the words. It is a common belief that the wicked will suffer eternally; therefore, death for them is *not* death. Sunday is frequently referred to as “the Lord’s day;” therefore, John must have meant that. “Forever” is usually thought of as synonymous with “endless;” therefore, in the Bible it must always mean “endless.” Thieves slip up on people quietly; therefore, if Christ is to come as a thief, we will not know when He comes. But in none of these instances is the interpretation Biblical.

The Bible interprets all of its essential symbols. The interpretation was sometimes given almost immediately, as in Daniel 8 (compare verse 3 with 20; verse 5 with 21; verse 8 with 22). On other occasions explanation was delayed, as in Daniel’s experience recorded in Daniel 8:26, 27 and 9:20-23. Again, it was sometimes many centuries before the true meaning of some symbols could be grasped, such as the Seed of the woman wounding the head of the serpent and the Messiah being wounded in His heel (Genesis 3:15). Not until after the earthly life, death, and resurrection of the Saviour did the real significance of this verse shine forth. And the final bruising of the head of the serpent is yet to come.¹²

The important point to remember is that Bible interpretations of passages and symbols in the Scriptures are accurate interpretations. We must avoid reading our own meaning or another person’s interpretation into the words of the Bible. Men’s interpretations are at best only conjecture. Finding and applying Scripture explanations of Scriptural ideas requires a thorough knowledge of the whole Bible. On the other hand, searching out connections between one part of the Bible and another and

¹¹ “The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation.”—*Education*, page 190:2.

¹² See *Gospel Workers*, page 312:3.

probing to discover full meanings is one of the finest of all ways of becoming acquainted with the whole Bible. Skill and understanding grow with the pursuit of the study.¹³

VI. Using Aids to Bible Study

There are numerous aids that can be employed to make Bible study more effective and rewarding. God has provided a particular guide in the spirit of prophecy writings given through Ellen G. White. Their place in Bible study will be discussed in chapter 8. Those who know the languages in which the Bible was written possess an invaluable aid to study. Bible dictionaries, Bible commentaries, lexicons, atlases, and books on archaeology, history, and other related topics will contribute to your ability to dig out and to understand Bible truth. Perhaps the most-used aid will be your concordance—possibly *Cruden's Concordance* for everyday text finding, or preferably *Young's Analytical Concordance* (or *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*) which relates the English word in each case to the Greek or Hebrew term for which it is a translation.

Of especial interest and help among commentaries and dictionaries will be *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* and the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Dictionary*. These scholarly publications should be brought into use in all your study. The enlarged *Index to the Writings of Ellen G. White* furnishes a splendid guide to subjects, comments on Scripture passages, and specific quotations sought.

If you use the King James Version for most of your study, you should have access to some type of guide to words that have changed in meaning during the past three and one-half centuries. Many hundreds of words—in some instances very vital words—have meanings today that differ widely from their meaning in 1611. Some examples were given in chapter 4. The booklet, *Bible Words That Have Changed in Meaning*, edited by Luther A. Weigle and published by Thomas Nelson and Sons, is a good guide. Some verses simply will not be understood unless you recognize these varied or new meanings.

The use of reliable helps to Bible study will greatly increase both your understanding of the Bible and your enjoyment in its study. You will gain from careful study and accurate interpretation a sense of satisfaction that can never come through a casual approach.

One Bible student has said that we should approach our Bible study with a desire and determination to learn first of all what the Bible writer

¹³ See *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pages 42:2 to 43:0.

actually said, then what he meant by what he said, then what the Holy Spirit wants us to learn from what was meant by the Bible writer.

If you adopt these principles early in your study of these fundamental topics, and practice them throughout the present course of study, by the time you have finished this series they should be firmly enough fixed in mind that you will have them as a permanent part of your approach to the Bible.¹⁴

TOPICS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Study carefully 2 Peter 3:15, 16. What reasons can you see for the declaration that those who are “unlearned” and “unstable” “wrest” the Scriptures? Are not the Scriptures for the purpose of teaching the unlearned and stabilizing the unstable? See *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary* on this passage, and other sources that will throw light on the meanings of the words, before you state your conclusions.

2. What can you find in the following passages that illustrates or broadens your understanding of the relation between willingness to do God's will and the understanding of Bible truth?

Psalm 119:11-16

Proverbs 2:1-7

Acts 17:11

Psalm 119:105

Jeremiah 15:16

3. Taken by itself, 1 Timothy 4:4 is understood by some to teach that it is proper to eat anything you want, just as long as you are thankful for it. Show either that this is, or that this is not, in harmony with the rest of the Bible teaching on the subject of what should or should not be eaten.

4. Study carefully Isaiah 28:9-13; 2 Timothy 2:15; and John 5:39. Check with *The S.D.A. Bible Commentary* or other works as well as spirit of prophecy references. What bearing, if any, do these passages have on the matter of Bible study?

5. Read *Counsels on Sabbath School Work*, pages 22-44, and make a list of all the practical suggestions you find on how to study the Bible.

6. Give study to *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 698-711, “The Mysteries of the Bible.” Select sentences that show the benefits to be gained through

¹⁴ “A true knowledge of the Bible can be gained only through the aid of that Spirit by whom the word was given. And in order to gain this knowledge we must live by it. All that God's word commands, we are to obey. All that it promises, we may claim. The life which it enjoins is the life that, through its power, we are to live. Only as the Bible is thus held can it be studied effectively.”—*Education*, page 189:2.