

# Dealing With Difficult Passages



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *2 Tim. 2:10–15, 1 Chron. 29:17, James 4:6–10, Gal. 6:9, Acts 17:11.*

**Memory Text:** “And consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures” (*2 Peter 3:15, 16, NKJV*).

When discussing the apostle Paul's letters, Peter writes that in them, and in some other places in Scripture, there are “some things hard to understand” (*2 Pet. 3:16, NKJV*). These words are twisted or distorted by “ignorant and unstable people” (*2 Pet. 3:16, NIV*) to their own destruction. Peter does not say that all things are difficult to understand—but only that some are.

And we know that, don't we? What honest reader of the Bible hasn't come across texts that seem strange and difficult to understand? Certainly, at some point or another, we've all had this experience.

That's why we will take a look this week, not so much at difficult texts per se, but at what might be the reasons for these challenges and how, as faithful seekers of truth from the Word of God, we can work through them. In the end, some of these challenging statements might never be solved this side of heaven. At the same time, the vast majority of texts in the Bible present no difficulty whatsoever, and there's no need to allow the small number of difficult ones to weaken our trust in the reliability and authority of God's Word as a whole.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 20.

## Possible Reasons for Apparent Contradictions

**Read 2** Timothy 2:10–15. Paul admonishes Timothy to be diligent and to be “accurately handling the word of truth” (*NASB*). What important message is he giving to all of us here?

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No thoughtful and honest student of Scripture will deny the fact that there are things in the Bible that are difficult to understand. This situation should not disturb us. In fact, in a sense those difficulties are to be expected. After all, we are imperfect and finite beings, and no person has a comprehensive knowledge of every area of learning, let alone of divine things. Hence, when ignorant and finite human beings try to understand the wisdom of the infinite God of Scripture, there is bound to be some difficulty. Such difficulty in understanding biblical teachings, however, does not in any way prove that what the Bible affirms is untrue.

Those who dismiss the biblical teaching of divine revelation and inspiration often declare those difficulties to be contradictions and errors. Because for them the Bible is more or less just a human book, they believe that the Bible must contain imperfections and errors. With such a mind-set, there is often no serious attempt to look for an explanation that takes into consideration the unity and trustworthiness of Scripture that results from its divine inspiration. People who start to question the first pages of Scripture, the Creation account (for instance), may soon be led to cast into doubt and uncertainty much of the rest of Scripture, as well.

Some discrepancies in Scripture might be due to minor errors of copyists or translators. Ellen G. White has stated: “Some look to us gravely and say, ‘Don’t you think there might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators?’ This is all probable, and the mind that is so narrow that it will hesitate and stumble over this possibility or probability would be just as ready to stumble over the mysteries of the Inspired Word, because their feeble minds cannot see through the purposes of God. Yes, they would just as easily stumble over plain facts that the common mind will accept, and discern the Divine, and to which God’s utterance is plain and beautiful, full of marrow and fatness. All the mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest revealed truth.”—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 16.

**Why is it so important that we approach the Bible in a spirit of humility and submission?**

## Deal With Difficulties Honestly and Carefully

Have you ever had the experience of coming across a text or set of texts that you didn't understand, or found difficult to harmonize with other texts or reality in general? It's hard to imagine that at some time or another you haven't faced this problem. The question is, How did you respond? Or, even more important, *How should you respond?*

**Read 1 Chronicles 29:17, Proverbs 2:7, 1 Timothy 4:16.** What are these texts saying that can apply to the question of how we deal with difficult passages?

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Only when we are honest can we face difficulties adequately. Honesty safeguards us so that we do not evade any difficulties or try to obscure them. Honesty also will restrain us from giving superficial answers that do not really bear the test of scrutiny. God is pleased with honesty and integrity. Therefore, we should emulate His character in all we do, even in our study of the Bible.

Honest people will deal with Bible difficulties in such a way that they are careful not to present information out of context, distort the truth with loaded language, or mislead others by means of manipulating evidence. It is far better to wait for a sustainable answer for a difficulty than to attempt to provide an evasive or unsatisfactory solution. A positive side effect of being honest in our Bible study is that it builds trust, and trust is at the core of all healthy personal relationships. It convinces people much more than flimsy answers. It is better to say that you just don't know how to answer the question or accurately explain the text, than to try to make it say what you want it to say when, perhaps, it really doesn't.

Careful people earnestly want to know the truth of God's Word and, therefore, consistently make sure that they do not rush to hasty conclusions that are based on limited knowledge or flimsy evidence. Careful people are determined not to overlook any aspect or detail that could be important. They are not hurried in their thinking, but thorough and diligent in their study of the Word of God and all related information.

**What do you do, or what should you do, with texts that you don't fully understand or that don't seem to fit with your understanding of truth?**

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## Deal With Difficulties Humbly

**Read** James 4:6–10, 2 Chronicles 7:14, and Zephaniah 3:12. Why is humility important when we try to tackle difficult passages in Scripture?

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Many people have come to the amazing realization and humbling insight that they are dependent upon something and someone outside of themselves. They have realized that they are not the measure of all things. These people value truth over their ego's need to be right, and they are aware that truth is not of their own making but, rather, what they confront. Perhaps the greatest truth that these people understand is just how little they really know of truth. They know, as Paul wrote, that they "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12).

The benefits of this humility in thinking are manifold: the habit of humble inquiry is the foundation of all growth in knowledge, for it generates a freedom that naturally produces a teachable spirit. This does not mean that humble people are often necessarily wrong, or that they will always change their minds and will never have a firm conviction. It means only that they are submissive to biblical truth. They are aware of the limitations of their knowledge and, therefore, are capable of expanding their knowledge and understanding of God's Word in a way that the intellectual person, arrogant and proud, won't do.

"All who will come to the Word of God for guidance, with humble, inquiring minds, determined to know the terms of salvation, will understand what saith the Scripture. But those who bring to the investigation of the Word a spirit, which it does not approve, will take away from the search a spirit which it has not imparted. The Lord will not speak to a mind that is unconcerned. He wastes not his instruction on one who is willingly irreverent or polluted. But the tempter educates every mind that yields itself to his suggestions and is willing to make of none effect God's holy law.

"We need to humble our hearts, and with sincerity and reverence search the Word of life; for that mind alone that is humble and contrite can see light."—*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 22, 1907.

**How do you strike the right balance between humility and certainty? For example, how would you answer the charge, *How can you Seventh-day Adventists be so certain that you are right about the Sabbath and that almost everyone else is wrong?***

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## Determination and Patience

**Read** Galatians 6:9. While Paul speaks here about our persistence in doing good to others, the same attitude is necessary when we deal with difficult questions. Why are determination and patience important in solving problems?

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Real achievement always requires tenacity. What we obtain too easily we often esteem too lightly. The difficulties in the Bible give us an opportunity to set our brains to work, and the determination and persistence with which we pursue a solution reveals how important the issue is for us. Any time that we spend studying the Bible to try to find out more about its meaning and message is time well spent. Perhaps the experience of diligently searching the Scriptures for an answer, even for a long time, will be a greater blessing than the solution to the problem if we eventually do find it. After all, when we find a solution to a vexing problem, it becomes very precious to us.

The fact that you cannot solve a difficulty quickly does not prove that it cannot be solved. It is remarkable how often we overlook this evident fact. There are many who, when they meet a difficulty in the Bible, and give it a little thought and can see no possible solution, at once jump to the conclusion that the problem cannot be solved. Some start questioning the trustworthiness of the Bible altogether. But we should not forget that there may be a very easy solution even if we in our limited human wisdom—or ignorance—don't see it. What would we think of a beginner in algebra who, having tried in vain for half an hour to solve a difficult problem, declares that there is no possible solution to the problem because he could find none? The same is true for us in our study of the Bible.

When some difficulties defy even your strongest efforts to solve them, lay them aside for a while, and in the meantime, practice what God has clearly shown to you. Some spiritual insights are gained only after we have been willing to follow what God has already told us to do. So, be persistent and patient in your study of the Bible. After all, patience is a virtue of the believers at the end of time (*see Rev. 14:12*).

**What can we learn from other people who have diligently and patiently studied challenging Bible passages? How can we encourage others not to give up their search for truth? Why don't we have to be afraid when we come across a difficult passage in Scripture?**

## Deal With Difficulties Scripturally and Prayerfully

**Read** Acts 17:11; Acts 8:35; and Acts 15:15, 16. What did the apostles and members of the early church do when they were confronted with difficult questions? Why is Scripture still the best source for its own interpretation?

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The best solution to Bible difficulties is still found in the Bible itself. Bible problems are best dealt with when they are studied in the light of all Scripture instead of just dealing with a single text in isolation from others or from the whole of Scripture. We must, indeed, use the Bible to help us understand the Bible. Learning to mine the great truths found in Scripture is one of the most important things we can do.

If you do not understand a passage of Scripture, try to gather some light from other biblical passages that deal with the same subject. Always try to find clear statements of Scripture to shed light on those passages that are less clear. It also is very important never to darken and cloud clear statements of Scripture by bringing to them difficult-to-understand passages. Rather than having extra-biblical sources or philosophy or science explain the meaning of the Bible, we should allow the text of Scripture itself to unfold its meaning to us.

It has been said that on our knees we literally look at difficulties from a new perspective. For in prayer, we signal that we are in need of divine help in interpreting and understanding Scripture. In prayer, we seek the illumination of our minds through the same Holy Spirit who inspired the biblical writers to write what they wrote.

In prayer, our motives are laid open, and we can tell God why we want to understand what we read. In prayer, we ask God to open our eyes to His Word and to give us a willing spirit to follow and practice His truth. (This is crucial!) When God guides us through His Holy Spirit in response to our prayers, He does not contradict what He has revealed in the Bible. God will always be in harmony with the Bible, and confirm and build upon what He has inspired the biblical writers to communicate to us.

**How does prayer help you get into the right frame of mind to be able to understand and obey the Word of God better?**

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**Further Thought:** Read Ellen G. White, “What to Do With Doubt?” pp. 105–113, in *Steps to Christ*. Read section 8 in the document “Methods of Bible Study,” which can be found at <http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/bible-interpretation-hermeneutics/methods-bible-study>.

In the Bible are many mysteries that finite human beings find difficult to comprehend and that are too deep for us to explain fully. This is why we need a humble mind, and should be willing to learn prayerfully from Scripture. Faithfulness to Scripture allows the biblical text—even though its meaning goes against our grain—to say what it actually says. Faithfulness to Scripture will respect the text rather than alter the text (yes, some actually change the texts themselves) or evade its true meaning.

“When the word of God is opened without reverence and without prayer; when the thoughts and affections are not fixed upon God, or in harmony with His will, the mind is clouded with doubts; and in the very study of the Bible, skepticism strengthens. The enemy takes control of the thoughts, and he suggests interpretations that are not correct. Whenever men are not in word and deed seeking to be in harmony with God, then, however learned they may be, they are liable to err in their understanding of Scripture, and it is not safe to trust to their explanations. Those who look to the Scriptures to find discrepancies, have not spiritual insight. With distorted vision they will see many causes for doubt and unbelief in things that are really plain and simple.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 110, 111.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why are the attitudes toward the Bible that we discussed this week so foundational for a proper understanding of Scripture? What other attitudes toward the Bible do you believe are crucial in helping you better understand it?
- 2 Why should we not be surprised to find things in the Bible that are hard to explain and understand? After all, how many things of the natural world itself are at times hard to understand? To this day, for instance, water (*water!*) is filled with mysteries.
- 3 As Adventists, how can we answer the question of Luke 23:43, where (according to most translations) Jesus is telling the thief that he will be in heaven with Jesus on that day? What are honest ways to respond? How, for instance, can texts such as John 20:17, Ecclesiastes 9:5, and 1 Corinthians 15:16–20 help us understand the issue in question here?

**Key Texts:** *2 Pet. 3:15, 16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 Tim. 4:16; 1 Chron. 29:17; Prov. 2:7; James 4:6; Gal. 6:9.*

## ***Part I: Overview***

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At some point, every student of the Bible has encountered some passages of Scripture that are challenging to understand. This difficulty should not surprise us. Any of us who are confronted with another culture and worldview know that, inevitably, there will be things we do not understand right away, because such things are foreign to us. The same holds true for the worldview of Scripture. If we understood everything in Scripture, there would be no need to gain new insights, and there would be less incentive to grow in spiritual knowledge. How we approach difficult passages not only reveals much about our attitude about Scripture, but it also shows how serious we are in our search for answers. The amount of time and mental energy we invest in dealing with difficulties, trying to find solutions that are faithful to Scripture, reveals how important Scripture is to us and how important finding answers is to us. Difficult passages not only challenge us but they also provide a unique opportunity to dig deeper and to search the Scriptures more thoroughly so that we can understand the Bible writers and God's message even more fully. We do not need to be afraid of encountering things in Scripture that we do not understand. In fact, we can be grateful even for challenging and difficult passages in the Bible, because they provide an opportunity to grow in our understanding. There are some important attitudes that will influence whether those difficulties will become a blessing or a curse for us.

## ***Part II: Commentary***

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### **Possible Reasons for Difficulties and Apparent Contradictions**

Many scholars who do not believe in the divine inspiration of Scripture assume that Scripture is contradictory and full of mistakes, because in their view, to be human means to be fallible and imperfect. While it is true that human beings are fallible and not always truthful, it also is a fact that even fallible human beings are fully capable of discerning and speaking the truth. If even fallible beings are capable of communicating truth faithfully, how much more should we expect God, for whom it is impossible



to lie (*Heb. 6:18*), to be able to prevent the Bible writers from misleading us in what they write.

When people approach Scripture with methodological doubt, they will accept its truthfulness only when there is indubitable evidence and proof for its correctness. Rather than granting Scripture the benefit of the doubt when we do not have all the information available, many critical scholars only accept those passages as trustworthy and true where human reason has demonstrated their correctness or where external evidence has clearly revealed that Scripture is in harmony with archaeological or scientific findings. If these external criteria are the final norm for what is acceptable, and Scripture sometimes does not live up to them, such interpreters think they have found contradictions.

In dealing with biblical statements, we need to remember that the Bible writers frequently used nontechnical, ordinary, everyday language to describe things. For example, they spoke of sunrise (*Num. 2:3, Josh. 19:12*) and sunset (*Deut. 11:30, Dan. 6:14*) (i.e., they used the language of appearance rather than scientific language). Furthermore, one must not confuse a social convention with a scientific affirmation. The need for technical precision varies according to the situation in which a statement is made. Therefore, imprecision is not the same as untruthfulness.

Some discrepancies might be due to minor variations and errors caused by copyists and translators of the Bible. Most of those transmissional errors are unintentional changes, where copyists confused similar letters or, when copying a text, the copyist accidentally “skips ahead to another word or line with the same word or letter. This tendency is compounded when there are no spaces between words or punctuation marks, which certainly was the case for Greek texts and may have been true of Hebrew as well.”—Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), p. 46. Sometimes a reversal in the order of two letters or words occurs. For example, in John 1:42 the name “John” [*Iōannou*], as found in several manuscripts, is read “Jonah” [*Iōna*] in some other manuscripts (see Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible*, p. 48, for this and other examples). Such problems should not distress us. First of all, the biblical manuscripts are by far the most reliable and best-preserved manuscripts of the ancient world. No other literature is transmitted in so many manuscripts and is copied so meticulously in reference to the original composition as are the biblical manuscripts. Second, those minor changes can be corrected in light of the other evidence that is available. They do not affect any major doctrine or teaching of the Bible. While copyists and translators generally have been extremely careful in their work, they were not inspired as were the original biblical authors. Ellen G. White was aware that there “might have been some mistake in the copyist or in the translators.” But for her, all those “mistakes will not cause trouble to one soul, or cause any feet to stumble, that would not manufacture difficulties from the plainest

revealed truth.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 16.

### **Deal With Difficulties Honestly and Carefully**

God is pleased with honesty (*1 Chron. 29:17*). If we honestly seek the truth, we will find it. Honesty will win in the long run. Dealing with difficulties honestly means that we do not deny them or distort the evidence but deal with them in an unbiased way. It is far better to admit honestly that we do not have a satisfactory answer to a difficulty than to bend the evidence in order to make it more palatable to our liking. Shallow answers will not stand the test of scrutiny and will cast a shadow over our credibility. A pious lie is perhaps the most destructive lie of all, because it casts a dark shadow on the character of God and His Word and will call into question even our own integrity. If we ignore honesty in our search for answers, we will kill our conscience and endanger our spiritual life. Eventually we will be in danger of not valuing truth at all. Perhaps in the end, we might even be unable to distinguish truth from falsehood. But honesty brings a blessing in its wake—it builds trust with the very people whom we want to win for the truth of the Bible. Honesty is the foundation of all healthy personal relationships. Our honesty should be coupled with carefulness. Honesty can wait and will not rush to hasty conclusions that are based on limited information. Honesty will do everything needed to carefully evaluate the evidence that is available.

Can you think of examples of dishonest answers about the Bible and the negative (long-term) impact these have had on others? Can you think of situations where honest answers to biblical questions have had a positive (long-term) impact on those who heard them?

### **Deal With Difficulties Humbly**

Humility is the opposite of pride. Pride prevents us from appreciating the insights and achievements of others. Pride does not need to learn, because pride thinks it knows everything already. Humility, on the other hand, acknowledges that truth is not something of one's own making but is God-breathed (*see 2 Tim. 3:16*). Humble people have a teachable spirit and do not claim to have all the answers. They are capable of expanding their knowledge of God's Word in a way that arrogant and proud people are incapable of doing. Because pride is so deeply seated in all of us and humility goes against the grain of our culture and society, a posture of humility is perhaps the most difficult attitude of Bible study to assume.

Do you know anyone who has a genuinely humble intellectual character? Who is it? What impresses you the most about his or her life and scholarship?

Reflect on the following statement by Ellen G. White on this subject:

“Those who desire to doubt will have plenty of room. God does not propose to remove all occasion for unbelief. He gives evidence, which must be carefully investigated with a humble mind and a teachable spirit, and all should decide from the weight of evidence.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 255.

### **Deal With Difficulties With Determination and Patience**

Some difficulties defy easy and quick answers. They require determination and patience. For centuries, scholars had been puzzled over one of the most perplexing discrepancies in Scripture: the disparate numbers of the reigns of the Hebrew kings in the Old Testament. The Bible provides much information about these kings, but when the information is put together, it seems contradictory. It would have been easy for Adventist scholar Edwin Thiele to accept this unsolved discrepancy as a given. But because he believed in the truthfulness and reliability of Scripture, he was determined not to give up and for years studied all the evidence. By carefully studying the biblical data and comparing it with extrabiblical sources, he finally was able to show that different methods were used to count the years in the reigns of the Hebrew kings. His solution is consistent with the scriptural record and the records of other nations of the ancient world. His book *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983) has become a standard work that is widely recognized in scholarly circles, far beyond the borders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

## ***Part III: Life Application***

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Many so-called mistakes are not the result of God’s revelation but are the result of our misinterpretations. They arise not from any obscurity of the Bible but from the blindness and prejudice of the interpreter. Yet, there are some biblical difficulties that defy quick solutions. They are difficult to understand, even for the most honest and determined person. But just because I have not found a solution to a particular problem does not mean that there is no solution at all. It is quite likely that other careful students of Scripture have wrestled with the same difficulty long before I did, and probably there is an answer, even if I am not aware of it.

But we also can experience what Daniel experienced when he was confronted with passages of Scripture that he did not understand (*see Dan. 8:27, 9:20–23*). He prayed (*see Dan. 9:1–19*). When we are on our knees, we may gain a completely new perspective on some problems.

In what situations has prayer made a difference in your life when dealing

with some difficult questions? Share your experience with others.

For further principles and specific examples on how to deal with difficult passages, see Gerhard Pfandl (ed.), *Interpreting Scripture: Bible Questions and Answers*, Biblical Research Institute Studies 2 (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2010).

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