

Misunderstanding the Bible: Making Sense of Difficult Passages

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The Bible is an awesome book! It can be understood by a third grader, yet still intrigue a scholar over a lifetime of study. At Gateway, the Bible is both the center of our curriculum and a precious resource for personal spiritual development. We affirm the Bible is inspired, infallible, inerrant...and sometimes difficult to interpret. Our hearts resonate with the clarity of John 3:16, the thunderous certainty of Genesis 1:1, and the tender mercies of the 23rd Psalm. Our brains cramp, however, when we read affirmations of slavery (Eph. 6:5), dress code restrictions for women (1 Cor. 11), archaic instructions about worship practices (1 Cor. 15), condemnations of sexual behaviors openly promoted today (Rom. 1:26–27), and God's annihilation of his enemies (Is. 34:2). Some of these passages are difficult to understand, but given our high view of Scripture, we must do our best to make sense of them for today.

To help with this dilemma, our Fall 2021 chapel series is entitled, "Misunderstanding the Bible: Making Sense of Difficult Passages." We have chosen about a dozen troubling texts and asked careful scholars and capable preachers to help us understand them. And not only to understand them, but to model for us methods and principles for interpreting difficult passages so we might better fulfill our biblical mandate of "correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). My task today is to launch this series and lay out a framework for the challenging task of making sense of difficult passages.

The Bible itself acknowledges this dilemma in our text for today. Join me as we read 2 Peter 3:14-16: “Therefore, dear friends, while you wait for these things, make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in his sight, at peace. Also, regard the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our dear brother Paul has written to you according to the wisdom given to him. He speaks about these things in all his letters. There are some things hard to understand in them. The untaught and unstable will twist them to their own destruction, as they also do the rest of the Scriptures.”

The Bible Sustains and Purifies

Our passage begins with the word, “therefore” which refers to the theme of the previous section – the second coming of Jesus and the creation of a new heaven and new earth. The text continues, “while you wait for these things,” meaning while we wait for the Lord’s return and our subsequent eternal residence with him, we are supposed to be doing something. That something is outlined in the next phrases. First, we are to “make every effort to be found without spot or blemish in his sight.” Our being without spot or blemish is in contrast to unbelievers, described in 2 Peter 2:13, who “consider it a pleasure to carouse in broad daylight. They are *spots and blemishes*, delighting in their deceptions while they feast with you.” Being without spot or blemish means living holy, blameless lives – with attitudes and actions in contrast to unbelievers. Peter is echoing a common theme and using Pauline language, perhaps foreshadowing how he is about to affirm Paul’s writings as Scripture. For example, Paul wrote, “For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be *holy and blameless* in love before him” (Eph. 1:4); “He did this to present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle, or anything like that, but *holy and blameless*” (Eph. 5:27); “so that you may be

blameless and pure” (Phil. 2:15); “but now he has reconciled you by his physical body through his death, to present you holy, *faultless, and blameless* before him” (Col. 1:22). While we wait for the Lord’s return, we are to live holy and blameless lives – without spot or blemish.

Second, while we wait we are to experience “peace” and “regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.” Imagine the anxiety of first century believers – persecuted and wondering when Jesus was going to return for them. Peter reminded them – and us – that an expectation of the second coming of Jesus gives us peace, rather than produces anxiety. Rather than stress about the slowness of his return, we take comfort in the surety of it. We also regard the delay of the Lord’s return as part of our salvation – not regeneration (salvation in the moment) but sanctification (salvation worked out over a lifetime). The longer the Lord delays his return, the more time we have to experience peace and learn to live sanctified lives.

So Peter begins his affirmation about the importance of Scripture by reminding fellow believers they can draw strength from “what Paul has written” as they live in anticipation of Jesus’ return. The Bible is more than a religious textbook or compendium of academic minutiae. It is a resource to sustain and purify us through the darkest challenges of life.

The Bible Can Be Hard to Understand

Peter continues commenting about Scripture and admits Paul wrote some things “that are hard to understand.” Before we talk about the “hard to understand” issue, let’s consider a few other interesting details in the text.

First, Peter calls Paul “our dear brother.” The collective pronoun and affectionate appellation stands out. In other contexts, Peter used the pronoun “I” without reservation so the plural used here is more than an “editorial we.” Peter chose a plural pronoun to indicate church

leaders – plural – felt brotherly affection for Paul. He also calls Paul his “dear brother,” indicating familial affection instead of the more formal title “Apostle.” This is particularly interesting in light of Galatians 2:11-14 which records an intense conflict when Paul “opposed (Peter) to his face because he stood condemned.” We will consider that conflict more in a few moments, but for now, just note Peter and Paul seem to have resolved their intense, public conflict and learned to work together amiably. This is an important lesson for all of us. Christian leaders, even prominent leaders, can sometimes have sharp disagreement. That’s to be expected when convictions, cultures, generations, and egos collide. Conflict like this is inevitable, but forgiveness and restoration are also possible.

Second, Peter identifies three qualifiers which indicate he already regarded Paul’s writings as Scripture. First, Peter warned that detractors abused Paul’s writings as “they also do with the rest of the Scriptures.” This word translated “Scripture” is used 50 times in the New Testament in reference to the Old Testament. By Peter’s phrasing, it is clear he viewed Paul’s letters on par with the Old Testament. Second, Peter wrote Paul’s writings were a result of “wisdom given to him.” The Old Testament frequently describes wisdom as a valuable commodity originating with God. Peter viewed Paul’s writings as inherently wise, another allusion to their Source and veracity. Finally, Peter referenced “all his letters” which indicates Peter had either seen multiple epistles from Paul or perhaps already had access to a collective set of circulating copies (Col. 4:16). This also underscores the high value Peter placed on Paul’s writings. In summary, Peter viewed Paul’s collected letters – by their origin, content, and efficacy – as Scripture.

Having established that, now let’s return to the claim “there are some things hard to understand in them.” The word translated “hard to understand” is used only in this instance in

the New Testament. It's meaning is relatively straightforward – something hard to understand. It does not mean *impossible* to understand. That's a key distinction. The Bible may have some difficult passages but they are not unsolvable riddles. God wants us to obey his Word, therefore we must be able to understand it. This conclusion begs two important questions.

First, why were some of Paul's writings hard for first-century believers to understand? There are several possible answers. First, early believers did not have the full Pauline corpus. Most churches likely had only one or two letters. While Paul's writings address common themes from various perspectives, no single letter is comprehensive. Second, circular letters were one-sided conversations written to address issues known, quite possibly, only by Paul and the original recipients. Even Paul acknowledged this limitation when he wrote about sending Timothy or traveling himself to clear up confusion and address troubling church conflicts (1 Cor. 4:14-17). Third, early believers received Paul's letters in their cultural context. The ancient world was not monolithic. People in different cities, from diverse backgrounds, representing various cultures, and at various levels of faith development would have interpreted Paul's letters in their context – just like we do today. Finally, early believers – just like us today – were sin-tainted with flawed reasoning resulted from our fallen condition.

Now, the second question. What were the passages Peter felt were difficult to understand? On the surface, we might answer by listing the passages we will address in this chapel series. But that may not be the right answer for two reasons. First, we may be answering the question from our distinctive cultural setting. Second, we may be ignoring evidence in the Bible itself which intimates the passages Peter may have meant. Notice the use of "may" as the qualifier in both these observations. I am about to make some reasonable observations, not pronounce definitive edicts about which passages Peter found troubling. Now, let's now

consider the second question first – what were the passages Peter felt were difficult to understand?

Peter preached an inclusive gospel (Acts 3:25) and invited all people to become Jesus followers. Peter later received a special revelation – a vision of a large sheet filled with animals – which he interpreted to mean the gospel was for everyone (Acts 10:34-35). Yet, despite these realities, he still struggled with the practical and cultural tensions an inclusive gospel produced (Acts 10:14). Despite this special visionary revelation, Peter later struggled to resist peer pressure from Jewish Christians to maintain legal and cultural practices as part of establishing early Christian communities (Gal. 2:12). This resulted in open conflict with Paul, described in Galatians 2:11-14: “But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For he regularly ate with the Gentiles before certain men came from James. However, when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision party. Then the rest of the Jews joined in his hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were deviating from the truth of the gospel, I told Cephas in front of everyone, ‘If you, who are a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel Gentiles to live like Jews?’”

Peter may have struggled with Pauline passages which demand an inclusive gospel like Galatians 3:28, “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus,” or Ephesians 3:6, “the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” While we celebrate these passages today, they were revolutionary and controversial in the first century. Everyone was invited to receive the gospel as a free gift (Rom. 6:23)! Everyone was invited to have equal access to God through Jesus (Rom. 3:27-31)! Everyone was invited to equal membership in the church as the

body of Christ (Col. 3:11)! There is ample textual evidence Peter struggled with these concepts. So, when he claimed some Pauline passages were difficult to understand, he may have been referring to these passages. They are not controversial for most of us today, but they appear to have been for Peter.

Now back to the first question about how cultural context influences our perspective on what constitutes a difficult passage. Consider passages about limitations on women participating in public worship services. They are advised to keep their heads covered while praying (1 Cor. 11:5-6) and dialogue with their husbands rather than speaking out in public services (1 Cor. 14:34-35). In American culture, steeped in feminist ideology and liberation theology, these statements evoke strong responses ranging from outrage to reasoned workarounds to soften the edges. But consider how these verses might be heard by a Saudi Christian woman living in a culture which severely restricts women – prohibiting them from driving a car, traveling without a male chaperone, or being in mixed-gender social settings. She might respond to these same verses, from her cultural perspective, by saying, “Of course, I will keep my head covered while praying. Doesn’t every woman? It’s so exciting to go to church with my husband and listen to other men discuss the Bible with him. Having a Christian husband is such a blessing. He actually talks with me about spiritual matters – treating me with respect, listening to my opinions, as we learn to follow Jesus together. It’s so freeing to be able to worship God as a family, with other families, and know that we are all one in Jesus.”

By using this illustration, I am not condoning or justifying current Saudi cultural norms for women. They are oppressive and need to change. But, for a Saudi Christian woman, biblical passages we perceive to be restrictive and oppressive contain radical freedoms compared to how women are treated and expected to behave in Saudi culture as a whole. The Bible assures a

Saudi Christian woman she can go to church with her husband, sit in a social gathering with other men and women, feel valued as a sister-in-Christ in community with women and men, and discuss spiritual issues on equal terms with her husband. These are liberating breakthroughs in her context, not onerous restrictions. From her cultural perspective, these passages may not be so difficult to understand after all.

General Interpretative Principles

Drawing from my observations so far, along with input from several Gateway faculty members who teach Hermeneutics, let me now offer some principles for interpreting difficult passages in the Bible. Since we offer a semester-long Hermeneutics course on how to interpret the Bible, the time constraints for this message will only permit bullet points with limited explanation. Perhaps my comments might become lampposts that help us stay on the path of good biblical interpretation rather than a detailed map charting every aspect of the journey.

First, affirm difficult passages in the Bible can be understood. They are difficult to understand, but not impossible. God is not a heavenly Riddle-Master trying to trick or confuse his followers. God is a Revealing-Father who wants his children to know him, hear his Word, and understand what it means. While some parts of the Bible may be difficult, they are not impossible to understand.

Second, settle in for some challenging Bible study. Discerning the meaning of difficult passages requires hard work. The answers may not be immediate or easy. The Bible itself calls for deliberation and meditation to discover its full meaning (Ps. 119:15, 23, 48, 78). Students, your seminary enrollment is evidence you are willing to do this hard work and I commend you for your diligence.

Third, approach the interpretative challenge with humility. The word “may” is sometimes an acceptable verb in biblical interpretation. Despite your spiritual depth, intellectual superiority, verbal dexterity, and research acumen – you do not have the final answer on everything. Admit that, and be willing to hold your conclusions with deference to others who may interpret difficult passages differently.

Fourth, recognize cultural impact on interpreting the Bible. The Bible was written against several cultural backdrops over centuries. Work hard to understand what the Bible meant to its original audience in their unique context. Work equally hard to learn how your cultural perspective colors your interpretation of the Bible. Recognizing the influence of culture on biblical interpretation broadens our perspective and opens our minds to new ways of understanding difficult texts.

Fifth, recognize different literary genres and writing styles which are included in the Bible like law, poetry, prophecy, history, narrative, parables, proverbs, didactic, and apocalyptic literature. Some passages include sarcasm, hyperbole, exaggeration, understatement, and humor. Some difficult passages are easier to understand once you sort out the genre and style issues influencing their meaning.

Sixth, discern timeless principles and overriding themes from the Bible which help explain difficult passages by putting them in a larger context. The Bible’s overall redemptive narrative, the pre-eminence of Jesus, and the startling power of the gospel are three such themes. Keeping these big ideas in mind helps in interpreting difficult passages, if for no other reason than helping us maintain a proper perspective on the relative importance of these passages in the Bible and in the overall life of the church.

Seventh, allow clear biblical passages to interpret difficult passages. For example, there are multiple passages in the Bible about baptism and only one obscure passage about baptism for the dead (1 Cor. 15:29). The best way to understand what the Bible teaches about baptism is by considering the many verses which speak to the issue definitively and allow the weight of their meaning to overshadow the confusion about one obscure reference.

Finally, allow the witness of the church through the centuries to influence your interpretation of biblical texts. The church has been interpreting the Bible, including grappling with difficult texts, for centuries. On most major issues, Christian leaders have reached consensus and that counsel is helpful today. The historical diversity among Christians about lesser issues is also helpful, indicating we need to show deference and patience to each other as we interpret some texts and resolve some issues.

Knowing historical context is important so you can reject biblical interpreters who discover new insight never before known in the Christian movement. These charlatans are harmful in two ways. First, they bastardize Christianity by creating cultic movements based on their “special revelation.” Our generation is replete with examples from Jim Jones to David Koresh to Charles Manson to Marshall Applewhite. Second, other charlatans announce new insights which contradict thousands of years of biblical interpretation. The most egregious example today is self-labeled “Christian leaders” re-interpreting the Bible to support re-definitions of gender and marriage. Gender and marriage re-definitions may be a cultural phenomenon but they cannot be supported through sound biblical exposition. To do this, requires a complete rejection of the church’s historic understanding of what the Bible teaches on these issues.

The Bible Can Be Distorted

This leads us to the final insight from our passage. The most severe warning in our text is not to the person who misunderstands difficult passages in the Bible, but to the person who distorts the clear meaning of more straightforward texts. Peter describes these people as “the untaught and unstable.” The negatives here underscore what we have already established. The “taught and stable” can and will interpret the Bible correctly – further evidence and motivation to discern the meaning of the Bible and communicate it accurately.

In contrast, these truth-distorters “twist” the meaning of the Bible “to their own destruction.” The word “twist” implies marring, adjusting, or re-aligning the Bible’s message – not rejecting it. The most insidious and destructive biblical and theological errors today are high-sounding affirmations, often borrowing Christian vocabulary, which distort the clear, historic meaning of the Bible. The most troubling false teachers are not people who dismiss the Bible outright, but instead those who reshape its meaning to suit a personal or cultural agenda. The twisters are much more dangerous than the rejecters.

One example is found in the approach to the creation account of Genesis 1 and the affirmation in Gen. 1:27 that God created people “male and female.” Austen Hartke, author of *Transforming: The Bible and the Lives of Transgender Christians* and noted transgender advocate wrote, “Because the ancient Israelites tended to separate their world into binaries..., it’s not surprising that Genesis 1:27 breaks humans into two groups as well—male and female. But I’ve also concluded that this verse does not discredit other sexes or genders, any more than the verse about the separation of day from night rejects the existence of dawn and dusk, or the separation of land from sea rejects the existence of marshes and estuaries.” (See “God’s Unclassified World,” *Christian Century*, April 25, 2018, p. 27). This exegetical leap is

incredulous, yet represents the kind of biblical justification being promoted today to support never-before-considered “Christian” interpretations.

It is interesting, and tragic, who the text indicates suffers the most from twisted teaching – the false teachers. Their falsehoods harm their followers, but even more, sow the seeds of their own destruction. While we may not be able to prohibit false teachers, we are admonished to be on guard against them. Peter wrote, “Therefore, dear friends, since you know this in advance, be on your guard, so that you are not led away by the error of lawless people and fall from your own stable position” (1 Pet. 3:17).

Conclusion

At Gateway, we affirm the Bible is the Word of God. We are here, among many other reasons, to learn how to interpret the Bible accurately and communicate its message effectively. We recognize the weighty consequences of this responsibility – both for quality of life today and eternal life tomorrow. While we affirm the accessibility of the Bible, we also acknowledge some passages are difficult to interpret. We are willing to take on the task of sorting out what they mean – as best we can with our fallen nature, limited intellect, and cultural biases – and communicating those insights as needed.

We also accept the Bible’s counsel that “not many should become teachers, my brothers, because you know that we will receive a stricter judgment” (Jam. 3:1). Interpreting the Bible is a serious task to be undertaken by sober-minded people with full understanding of the gravity of the outcome. While that seems ominous, we take on the task with joy – knowing God has revealed himself and wants us to know him (Rom. 1:19-20; Heb. 1:1-2; Psalm 19:1-4). We can also have confidence that God himself, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, will

guide us as we strive to have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16). And, while we strive to interpret Scripture accurately, we labor under the reality of our current limitations and our hope of future clarity by agreeing “now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Toward that end, we commit ourselves today, to this new semester of study, and to a lifetime of helping people understand and obey the Word of God – including the difficult passages we may struggle to interpret. May God give us grace as we press on together!