

Sabbath School Lesson #12 – Dealing With Difficult Passages – 13-19 June 2020

Christ would have us understand and not wrest the scriptures to our destruction as others do who have not His Spirit. “And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you: As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction” (2 Peter 3:15-16). It is only the “unlearned and unstable” who wrest scriptures unto their own destruction. They who have a desire to understand and who read the simple promises of the Bible will not be among those who end up in destruction. Paul wrote his epistles to the laity in local churches, and we cannot suppose that the local churches who received differed from the great body of Christians in general, and of them we read that “not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Corinthians 1:26). The truest followers of Jesus have always been among “the common people.” So in those churches there were doubtless simple gardeners, shopkeepers, artisans, day laborers, carpenters, etc, and many servants in the families of wealthy citizens, together with a few who might hold some position of rank. When we consider that it was confidently expected that people of this sort would understand the letters, we may be encouraged to believe that the same class of people can understand his letters today. Paul’s exhortation and assurance to Timothy form the best guide to the study of all the epistles, and the whole Bible as well. “Consider what I say, for the Lord shall give thee understanding in all things.” “God is his own interpreter.” The words of the Bible explain the Bible. Nothing can take the place of prayerful meditation upon the exact words of the Bible. By this means the most unlearned in this world’s wisdom may become mighty in the Scriptures. The Lord has said just what He means, and the only way to find out just what He means is to become thoroughly familiar with just what He says, just as He says it.

In dealing with difficult passages, we need not wrest them, for the Lord in His mercy has long given as rules of Bible interpretation, through His servant, William Miller, which rules the Lord has approved through Ellen White, as follows: “Those who are engaged in proclaiming the third angel’s message are searching the Scriptures upon the same plan that father Miller adopted. In the little book entitled ‘*Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronology*,’ father Miller gives the following simple but intelligent and important rules for Bible study and interpretation:” {RH Nov 25, 1884 Par 23}. “1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible; 2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by diligent application and study; 3. Nothing revealed in Scripture can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering; 4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know, then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without a contradiction, you cannot be in error; 5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom is my rule, and not the Bible” {RH November 25, 1884 Par 24}. “The above is a portion of these rules; and in our study of the Bible we shall all do well to heed the principles set forth” {RH November 25, 1884 Par 25}.

This quarter, we are studying “how to interpret scripture.” Sadly, the Quarterly does not adopt the plan approved by Ellen White. Let us study the 14 rules by father Miller (Joshua Himes (ed), *Views of the Prophecies and Prophetic Chronologies* (Boston, 1842) pp 20-24):

1. Every word must have its proper bearing on the subject presented in the Bible. Proof, Matt. 5:18.
2. All Scripture is necessary, and may be understood by a diligent application and study. Proof, 2 Tim. 3:15-17.
3. Nothing revealed in the Scriptures can or will be hid from those who ask in faith, not wavering. Proof, Deut. 29:29; Matt. 10:26,27; 1 Cor. 2:10; Phil. 3:15; Isa. 45:11; Matt. 21:22; John 14:13,14; 15:7; James 1:5,6; 1 John 5:13-15.
4. To understand doctrine, bring all the scriptures together on the subject you wish to know; then let every word have its proper influence; and if you can form your theory without

a contradiction, you cannot be in error. Proof, Isa. 28:7-29; 35:8; Prov. 29:27; Luke 24:27,44,45; Rom. 16:26; James 5:19; 2 Pet. 1:19,20.

5. Scripture must be its own expositor, since it is a rule of itself. If I depend on a teacher to expound to me, and he should guess at its meaning, or desire to have it so on account of his sectarian creed, or to be thought wise, then his guessing, desire, creed, or wisdom, is my rule, and not the Bible. Proof, Ps. 19:7-11; 119:97-105; Matt. 23:8-10; 1 Cor. 2:12-16; Eze.34:18,19; Luke 11:52; Matt. 2:7,8.

6. God has revealed things to come, by visions, in figures and parables; and in this way the same things are often time revealed again and again, by different visions, or in different figures and parables. If you wish to understand them, you must combine them all in one. Proof, Ps. 89:19; Hos.12:10; Hab. 2:2; Acts 2:17; 1 Cor. 10:6; Heb. 9:9,24; Ps. 78:2; Matt. 13:13,34; Gen. 41:1-32; Dan. 2:7 and 8; Acts 10:9-16.

7. Visions are always mentioned as such. 2 Cor. 12:1.

8. Figures always have a figurative meaning, and are used much in prophecy to represent future things, times and events - such as mountains, meaning governments, Dan. 2:35,44; beasts, meaning kingdoms, Dan. 7:8,17; waters, meaning people, Rev. 17:1,15; day meaning year, etc. Eze. 4:6.

9. Parables are used as comparisons, to illustrate subjects, and must be explained in the same way as figures, by the subject and Bible. Mark 4:13.

10. Figures sometimes have two or more different significations, as day is used in a figurative sense to represent three different periods of time, namely: first, indefinite, Eccl. 7:14; and second, definite, a day for a year, Eze.4:6; and third, a day for a thousand years, 2 Pet. 3:8. The right construction will harmonize with the Bible, and make good sense; other constructions will not.

11. If a word makes good sense as it stands, and does no violence to the simple laws of nature, it is to be understood literally; if not, figuratively. Rev. 12:1,2; 17:3-7.

12. To learn the meaning of a figure, trace the word through your Bible, and when you find it explained, substitute the explanation for the word used; and if it make good sense, you need not look further; if not, look again.

13. To know whether we have the true historical event for the fulfillment of prophecy: If you find every word of the prophecy (after the figures are understood) is literally fulfilled, then you may know that your history is the true event; but if one word lacks a fulfillment, then you must look for another event, or wait its future development; for God takes care that history and prophecy shall agree, so that the true believing children of God may never be ashamed. Ps. 22:5; Isa. 45:17-19; 1 Pet. 2:6; Rev. 17:17; Acts 3:18.

14. The most important rule of all is, that you must have faith. It must be a faith that requires a sacrifice, and, if tried, would give up the dearest object on earth, the world and all its desires - character, living, occupation, friends, home, comforts, and worldly honors. If any of these should hinder our believing any part of God's word, it would show our faith to be vain. Nor can we ever believe so long as one of these motives lies lurking in our hearts. We must believe that God will never forfeit his word; and we can have confidence that He who takes notice of the sparrow's fall, and numbers the hairs of our head, will guard the translation of His own word, and throw a barrier around it, and prevent those who sincerely trust in God, and put implicit confidence in His word, from erring far from the truth.

Seventh-day Adventists will not declare difficult passages in the Bible to be contradictions if they will carefully, patiently, humbly and prayerfully follow the plan adopted by father Miller. Our Adventist pioneers were led to the truth as it is in Jesus by following the plan adopted by father Miller. One pioneer, James White, said: "That we may proceed intelligently, and for the particular benefit of those who may have forgotten them, I shall give an extract or two from Mr Miller's rules of interpretation, which are substantially those of every judicious interpreter of the word of God: 'Figures sometimes have two or more different significations;' — 'To learn the true meaning of figures, trace your figurative word through your Bible, and where you find it explained, put it on your figure; if it makes good sense you need look no further; if not, look again.' — 'Parables are used as comparisons to illustrate subjects, and must be explained in the same way as figures'" {James White, RH Sep 16, 1851, p 26}.