

HOW TO SOLVE BIBLE DIFFICULTIES

Here are more principles that will help you solve Bible difficulties — how to determine original word meanings — how to use marginal comments and footnotes — and other basic guidelines to help you better understand God's Word.

WORDS mean different things to different people. Bible verses have been misunderstood because a *wrong meaning* was given to a word that was not intended by the writer.

Knowing how words are *used in the Bible* is essential before finding their correct interpretation. Seeing how words are used in the Bible is more important than what meanings have been given to them by lexicons, dictionaries, and commentaries. These types of books are often based merely on etymology — the origin of words — or on the meaning put on words by *tradition*, or on how the words were used at some time *other than* the time at which they were written or spoken in the Bible.

Meaning of Words Can Vary

The usage of a word may change throughout different periods of time. Words are much like coins in that they can differ in meaning between different countries. Their meaning even changes at different periods of time in the same country.

Therefore, we must take great care when we try to find the meaning of words used in the Bible. We must know which English words are no longer used, which usage of English words has been changed, and also which usage of some Greek words has changed.

Not only have there been mistranslations, some English words used in the King James Version have *gone out of use altogether!*

Some English Words Now Obsolete

When studying the authorized King James Version, keep in mind that it was translated from the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts in 1611 — *over three hundred fifty years ago!* Many words and expressions used at that time have since changed in meaning or become totally obsolete and archaic — have gone out of use altogether.

When you come across these words and expressions in the Bible, the correct meaning of the scripture will not always be clear. This is where modern translations are very helpful. Check all such obscure scriptures in a modern translation to help you clearly understand.

Some English words have not become *obsolete*, but have *changed in meaning* since the King James Version was translated. The word "prevent" is a good example. This word originally meant *to precede* or *go before*, but now means *to hinder*. See I Thessalonians 4:15 which should be corrected into *today's* English: "We which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not *precede* them which are asleep."

The word "charity" is frequently used in the thirteenth chapter of I Co-

rinthians. This word meant *love* in 1611 A.D. It comes from the old French word *charitet* which meant *deariness*. This deariness of affection gradually evolved into the mercenary act of *giving money* which is the origin of our word "charity" as we use it today. But "charity" no longer represents the Greek word *agape* which should be translated "love" in I Corinthians 13 instead of "charity."

The Usage of Some Greek Words Changed

Greek is a living language that has changed down through the centuries. When the Holy Spirit inspired the Apostles to write the New Testament in Greek, it inspired them to use old Greek words with a new and expanded meaning attached to them.

The meaning of the Greek word *ecclesia* was expanded in this way. The Greeks used it only when referring to *a town's meeting* of its citizens (Acts 19:39), but the New Testament applies it to the assemblies or churches of God's people and to the people in the Church of God themselves.

Regarding the changes of Greek usage made by man, Bullinger says, "The Greek language was in use some four centuries before Christ, and had a wonderful literature. But, in the course of time the laws which operate to affect and change the usage of words wrought the same inevitable changes in

many Greek words. For this reason classical Greek usages are no infallible guide to the usage of Biblical Greek" (*How to Enjoy the Bible* by E. W. Bullinger, page 235).

This is why lexicons may *not* have the correct meaning of a word if their definition is based on classical Greek. Classical Greek differs in many ways from the *koine* or "Common" Greek used by the Apostles. *Papyri* of documents of all kinds have been dug up in Egypt that are in Greek and belong mostly to the first and second centuries before and after Christ. They have been a great help in finding the exact sense and usage of Greek words used during that period.

This information that is continually coming to light sometimes clarifies and gives added meaning to the scriptures. The Greek word *apecho* is generally defined as meaning *to have from, to receive or be (distant) from*. But the *papyri* show that it was the common form of giving a *receipt in full*. This is the way it is used in Matthew 6:2, 5 and 16.

When the scribes prayed, they did it to be seen of men. When men had seen them, therefore, they were given their *receipt in full*. There was nothing more for them to receive. They could expect no real answer to their prayers. The word "reward" does *not* convey this more accurate sense of the Greek word.

The *papyri* have also given added meaning to the Greek word *charagma* which means "a mark." "In the *papyri* this word (1) is always used for a mark connected with the emperor; and (2) it always contains his name or effigy, and the year of his reign. (3) *It was necessary for buying and selling*. (4) It was technically known as *charagma*" (*How to Enjoy the Bible* by Bullinger, page 241).

This word is found in all kinds of documents — even on "a bill of sale." In the Book of Revelation, it is used for the "mark" of the Beast who will be the Overlord of that day.

Greek Words With More Than One Meaning

The Bible uses many Greek words in different connections and with various meanings. *Different words* in the origi-

nal Greek (and in Hebrew as well) are often rendered by the *same word* in English where it was thought important to have variety.

Here is where the use of a lexicon and concordance will be a great help. Both Young's *Analytical Concordance* and Strong's *Exhaustive Concordance* are excellent for this purpose. With the use of these concordances, you can see at a glance, under the English word, the Greek word from which it is translated. The index will tell you whether the word is translated otherwise elsewhere — and if so, under what renderings you can find them.

Turn to every passage where the Greek word is used and note how the Bible, inspired by the Holy Spirit, makes use of that word. When you have all the information before you, you will soon discover whether the usage is uniform or whether there is more than one sense in which the word is used.

This type of study requires a spiritual understanding (I John 5:20; I Cor. 2:14), common sense, and strength of mind to follow the leading of God's Word in spite of what you have learned in the past and received from tradition.

The Meaning of "Parousia"

One particular sect teaches that Christ is already ruling here on earth. To back up their belief, they state that the word "coming" was not correctly translated in the New Testament and that it should be "presence."

The original Greek word for "coming" is *parousia*, and means: "a coming which includes the idea of a permanent dwelling from that coming onwards" (*A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* by Bullinger).

Whether this word should be translated "coming" or "presence" really doesn't matter as long as we understand the context of the verses in which this word is used. You can substitute the word "presence" for the word "coming" in the following scriptures: Mat. 24:22-27; I Thes. 4:15 and II Peter 3:10-12.

You will notice that all these scriptures show that the coming or presence of God and Jesus Christ will be accom-

panied by supernatural events to be seen by everyone on this earth. When Jesus Christ returns to this earth, this world will *know* when this *world-shaking* event takes place. It will not be a "secret rapture" or only known to a select group.

Nowhere does the Bible speak of an "invisible second presence" of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ will come in all His power and glory to put down all opposition and to rule all the nations of the earth with supernatural force. When Christ begins to rule the world, *everyone* will KNOW it!

Greek Words With a Uniform Usage

Not all Greek words have different usages. The vast majority have but one uniform usage and this should not be departed from in the English translation. Even though the violation of the principle may not lead to a misunderstanding or a wrong interpretation of a passage, it could cause great and unnecessary confusion.

As an example, if you were to make a study of the word "temptation" in the Bible, you will find that it has been translated from two different Greek words — *peirazo* and *peirasmos*. You will particularly notice that the latter Greek word occurs 21 times and is rendered temptation in all but one (I Pet. 4:12 where it is rendered "try").

But *peirasmos* is always used in the Bible in the sense of *trial* and especially in the sense of *trouble* or *tribulation*, because it is that which really *tries* a man better than anything else. This is clearly its use in Luke 8:13, "in time of *trial*, or trouble [not temptation in the sense of enticement, the normal usage of the word] fall away."

From this you can see that the word "temptation" is incorrectly used in Christ's prayer outline when He said, "And lead us not into temptation" (Mat. 6:13). Christ actually said, "Pray that you be not led into TRIAL." Or it could also be translated *tribulation* and specifically the Great Tribulation.

God will tempt no one (James 1:13). But God does allow trials to come upon us as Christians so that we can over-

come and grow in the grace and knowledge of Him. The Israelites were put to trial in the wilderness (Deut. 8:15, 16). God led them into that TRIAL in order to test them.

But, do you need to be constantly led into trials? Can you learn to obey God without Him bringing some trial upon you to help you grow as you should? You should pray that God would give you the strength to obey Him without having difficult trials come upon you. So, pray that God will not have to lead you into TRIALS. If you obey Him and live by His laws, this will not be necessary. But whatever God does will be for your good — whether it be through trials or not (Rom. 8:28).

Sometimes the *same* original Hebrew or Greek word is rendered by *different words* in English. This may lessen the effect of the sentence or suggest a difference in meaning where none exists.

As an example, the Hebrew word *sheol* and the Greek word *hades* are rendered thirty-one times as "the grave," thirty-one times as "hell" and three times as "pit."

Marginal Renderings and Footnotes

All good Bibles have marginal notes or a center reference column. This can be a very useful and valuable aid to the Bible student. This column contains different renderings of words and phrases that are either the literal translation of the Hebrew or Greek where the English idiom requires a different form of expression, or are alternative translations in doubtful cases. In most cases the meaning will not vary to any great extent. But in some cases the marginal rendering will clarify a scripture without having to check a concordance or lexicon.

One example is found in Hebrews 2:14 which some use to prove that

Satan the devil will be destroyed. The word "destroy," however, is in question. One Oxford edition of the King James Version uses numbers by words in the text to denote renderings given in the center reference column.

By the word "destroy" is the number 5. When we find the number 5 in the center reference column, we see a note which says, "Or *annul*." In other words, the Greek word translated "destroy" in Hebrews 2:14 could also be translated "annul." It could also be translated, as it is in other places, "make of no effect," or "make void."

Christ will annul Satan's power, make him of no effect. Satan will be made *powerless*, all his power and authority stripped from him by Jesus Christ at His return. This verse in Hebrews 2:14 does *not* teach that Satan will be *literally destroyed* (see the article, "Satan's Fate").

The center reference column also gives references of Old Testament passages that are quoted in the New Testament. Various editions of the Bible, of course, will differ as to what material is given in the center column.

Use these Bible helps to answer your Bible questions and solve the problems you come across in your study. Another helpful book is, *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible* by Haley. Over 900 solutions are given for so-called contradictions and discrepancies.

When studying the Bible, follow the basic rules given in the reprint article, "Twelve Rules for Bible Study," available on request. In addition, here are several more principles that will help you solve Bible difficulties.

What is the Literal Meaning?

Find out the most exact and LITERAL meaning of the original text. Acts 12:4 mentions the word "Easter," but is that the exact meaning of the original Greek? No! The original

Greek word is *pascha* and is translated as "passover" in every other place it is used in the New Testament.

Another example is in Luke 17:21 which some people take to mean that God's kingdom is set up in our hearts. First of all, they don't realize that Christ was talking to the *Pharisees*. Is the kingdom of God "within" the Pharisees? Of course not. The marginal rendering is, "in the midst of you." The representative of God's coming Kingdom, Jesus Christ, was right there *among* the Pharisees — not *in* them.

False teachers use Revelation 20:10 to prove that people are tormented in an ever-burning hellfire. But any word in the King James Version that is written in italics is *not* in the original text. Italicized words have been supplied by the translators to clarify the meaning in English. In some cases, however, the meaning has been perverted.

Notice that the word "are" in Revelation 20:10 is in italics. The correct word should be "were" or "were cast." The devil will be cast into the lake of fire "where the beast and the false prophet *were cast*, and [the devil] shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever."

Is the Language Figurative or Symbolic?

Scriptures written in figurative or symbolic language are not to be taken literally. In Psalm 42:9, David describes God as a rock and in Psalm 91:4 speaks of His wings and feathers. These descriptions are not to be understood as literally being that way. The spiritual attributes of God are compared to physical objects so that we, as human beings, can comprehend spiritual beings.

Prophecies often use symbols. Always remember that *the Bible interprets its own symbols*. The book of Revelation is filled with symbolic language. Mr. Armstrong's booklets about this book of Revelation show how these symbols are explained — either in the book itself or elsewhere in the Bible.

Note the exact force and precise meaning of each word used. The wrong idea that Peter was the first pope and built the Christian church is due to not applying this rule. In Matthew 16:18,

Christ said to Peter, "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." Did Christ mean that the Church was to be built upon Peter?

The Greek word used for "Peter" is *petros* which means a pebble or small stone. But for "rock" the Greek word is *petra* — a large rock or boulder. The Church was to be built on the Rock — *petra* — not on a pebble. Christ is the Rock (I Cor. 10:4) and the "chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:20).

The precise meaning of words can be important in understanding other scriptures. Notice that II Corinthians 3:7 is telling about the ministration of death written and engraven in STONES — *not* TABLETS of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written. These *whole stones* are mentioned in Deuteronom 27:1-6 on which was written the CIVIL LAW — the statutes and judgments — which included the administration of the death penalty (see the article, "Is Obedience to God Required for Salvation?").

What Did the Writer Mean?

Words of each writer in the Bible should be understood in the light of how they are normally used by that writer. What is the meaning the writer meant to convey? Matthew, for example, uses the term, "kingdom of heaven" whereas the other gospel writers consistently say "kingdom of God" (compare Mat. 3:2 with Mark 1:15). Matthew certainly didn't mean that the kingdom was in heaven. The word "of" denotes ownership, not locality. It is the kingdom belonging to God who rules from his throne in heaven. This is what Matthew meant to convey.

The apostle John often uses the term "little children" in his first epistle (I John 2:1; 3:7; 4:4). Obviously he's not writing to actual children. He's writing to the "children of God" (I John 3:10) — those who have been spiritually begotten.

The prophet Isaiah frequently uses the expression, "in that day." Whenever he says this, he means the "day of the Lord" — *the latter days* just before Christ returns (Isa. 2:2, 11-12).

Study Plain Scriptures First

Begin with the plainer scriptures

and reserve the more obscure ones until you have more knowledge. Realize that some scriptures, if taken by themselves and out of context, can be made to say more than one thing. This is why it is important to study all the scriptures on any one subject to get at the truth. In such a study, begin with the plain and clear scriptures first.

When studying the subject of the law and Ten Commandments, keep these clear and plain scriptures in mind: I John. 3:4; 2:4; 5:2-3; Mat. 5:17; 19:17. These scriptures *cannot* be twisted to say that God's Law and His Commandments are abolished and no longer need to be obeyed.

If heaven and hell is the subject, begin with such scriptures as John 3:13 and Acts 2:34 before trying to understand John 14:2 and Luke 16. About the soul, Genesis 2:7, Psalm 146:4 and Ecclesiastes 9:5 *are clear and plain.* Matthew 10:28, on the other hand, is vague and obscure. Any such scripture must be understood in the light of the plainer ones.

*Any passage in the Bible should be understood as those who were addressed would have understood it. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him" (I Cor. 16:2), did he mean they were to collect an offering at their Sunday morning church service? The booklet, *Which Day is the Sabbath of the New Testament?* explains this was not the case at all. The Corinthians knew and understood that Paul was referring to a collection of food and clothing for the poor church members at Jerusalem.*

The Corinthians also knew that Paul was referring to meat offered to idols when he said, "Whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no questions for conscience sake." The idea of eating unclean meat such as pork and rabbit didn't enter their minds. Yet, these scriptures are misunderstood today because people don't read Paul's letters from the point of view of those who received them.

Paul's letter to Philemon cannot be really understood at all unless you know the background and what was on Paul's

mind. Onesimus was once Philemon's slave who ran away and then became converted through Paul's preaching. Paul *tactfully* requests Philemon to take Onesimus back — not as a bondsman, but as a brother in Christ. Paul really wanted Philemon to *willingly* release Onesimus of his duties so Paul could use him in carrying out the gospel (verses 13-14). The tact and diplomacy Paul used is remarkable to see once you read the letter in this light.

Some say the "fruit of the vine" in Matthew 26:29 means grape juice — that the word wine itself is not used in the Gospels in connection with the New Testament Passover. But, according to the *Encyclopedia Biblica* (article, "Wine"), "fruit of the vine" was an expression used by the Jews at that time in a benediction over the *wine* cup.

Consider the opinions the writer opposed when reading what he wrote. The epistle of I John takes on an entirely new meaning when we understand that John was writing in opposition to the false teaching of Simon Magus that was creeping into the Church.

The apostle Paul continually attacked vegetarianism in his letters. He writes about this problem in Romans 14 and again in I Timothy 4:1-4 where he also opposes celibacy. In Philippians 3:1-9, Paul fights the idea that physical circumcision makes a man righteous.

In Colossians 2:16, Paul is not referring to the law of Moses or to rituals. Colosse was an area of asceticism and God's people were being criticized for fellowshiping, eating and drinking on the Holy Days (see the article, "Does it Matter Which Days We Should Observe?").

Use these rules in your study of the Bible. Study the Bible with the intention of finding out what every word means. Study it for *wisdom* and let it guide your daily life. And study it for *correction*, letting it help you grow closer to God.

Bible study shouldn't be a drudgery. It should be something you *love* to do. It should be *enjoyable*, exhilarating and satisfying. *Make Bible study a very important part of your life!*