



Some Things Hard

**A Thirteen Lesson Bible Study
by Jeff S. Smith**

Introduction

This is a study of difficult passages in the Bible and how we manage to interpret them. Some passages are attacked by skeptics as possessing inherent contradictions with other passages. Some are just plain difficult to interpret regardless of one's affection for Scripture. The first five lessons in this series are designed to help the student understand how to approach difficult passages; the remaining lessons deal with a few such passages.

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Lesson 1: People of the Book

In this lesson, we want to emphasize the importance of Bible study to understanding difficult passages and to living a holy life.

Brother Willard Collins listed six pleas for men and women who would follow the Bible in a lecture recorded in *Difficult Texts of the New Testament Explained*. This list is based on his, but is not identical:

1. Members of churches of Christ should be better equipped to know and explain what the Bible teaches than those of any other group.
2. We should love the Bible enough to dedicate time each day to its study, including in private, with family and with others.
3. We do not truly love the Bible if we are not serious about living the Bible. Bible study is not the province of academia, but is to be practical and influential.
4. Just as we plan our television viewing and trips to amusement parks and ball fields, we need to plan our Bible study in such a way that we accomplish something.
5. We must commit ourselves to the belief that the Bible is not the product of mere uninspired men, but that it is truly the will of Almighty God.
6. The word of God contains his power unto salvation and we will neither save ourselves nor others without becoming serious students of the message.

1. What did Jesus indicate about the importance of his words, especially those recorded in the gospel accounts of his life and ministry (John 8:28-32, 12:44-50)?

2. What claims does the Bible make for itself concerning its inspiration?

- John 14:26, 16:12-13:
- Second Peter 1:16-21:
- Second Timothy 3:16-17:

3. What is necessary that every Christian be a worker (Second Timothy 2:14-26)?

4. What did the Bereans do instead of just accepting everything they were told as fact (Acts 17:10-12)? What did John counsel his readers to do (1 John 4:1)?

5. How can we really begin to understand the difficult passages of the New Testament (Ephesians 3:4, 5:17; Hebrews 2:1-4, 5:9-6:3)?

Lesson 2: Approaching Difficult Texts

In this lesson, we want to put together some guidelines on handling the inevitable situation of finding a passage that proves difficult to understand. Rather than giving up, we want to come to understand it.

Reading the Bible, especially modern versions like the New American Standard Version and New King James Version, is as easy as reading a magazine. Studying the Bible, however, is a different matter altogether. Because Judgment Day is on a calendar in Heaven, with eternal consequences attached, learning God's will is infinitely more important than anything in a magazine or on a college curriculum. Yet many do not study the Bible and some have even given up on reading it, because some passages prove to be difficult to comprehend.

The first tool in Bible study, of course, is a good translation of the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. The King James Version, along with the aforementioned NASV and NKJV are recommended, while the most common modern text, the New International Version, is cautioned against because of its blatant Calvinism and Premillennialism. The difficult text should be approached with an open mind and with repeated reading before consulting any text written by uninspired men. Useful tools in the examination of perplexing texts include Bible dictionaries (e.g., Smith's or Easton's), Hebrew and Greek lexicons (e.g., Brown-Driver-Briggs and Thayer, for example, respectively), Bible encyclopedias (International Standard Bible Encyclopedia) and commentaries. A special word of caution must be attached to commentaries, for they always reveal any doctrinal or denominational biases held by their authors. Even those penned by members of churches of Christ must be read with circumspect analysis. A set in development by the Guardian of Truth Foundation is often helpful, as are works by sectarians such as Barnes and the *Pulpit Commentary*. Again, though, commentaries can be an impediment to understanding if they are used haphazardly or as if they are an inspired authority. Any commentary can contain error.

In his book on Hermeneutics, which should be read by every saint, D.R. Dungan listed a number of things which help us to understand God's word.

The following list is similar, but not identical:

1. expectation to understand for it is intended for using not confusing (John 12:44-48, Psalm 19:7)
2. good common sense (First Thessalonians 5:21, Hebrews 5:12-13)
3. faith in the inspiration of the Scriptures (First Peter 1:22-2:3, Second Peter 1:18-21, James 1:5-8)
4. diligence (Hebrews 11:6, First Timothy 4:13, Second Timothy 2:15)

5. a genuine, humble desire to know and obey the truths discerned (Ephesians 3:4, 5:17, Second Timothy 3:14-17)
6. the blessing of God petitioned through prayer (James 1:5)

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why are we obligated to study the Bible, even though some of it will prove challenging to our understanding of it (Second Timothy 2:15, John 7:16-17, Psalm 1:1-3, Psalm 119:97-105, 1 John 5:13-20)?

2. What is the difference, if any, between reading the Bible and studying the Bible? What can be gained from each? Why would we need to be concerned with which Bible translation we rely upon the most?

3. What is dangerous, if anything, about immediately running to a commentary when a difficult passage is encountered? What do you think is the best Bible commentary?

4. How did Ezra prepare himself to serve God (Ezra 7:10, Nehemiah 8:1-8)?

Lesson 3: Simplicity of the Scriptures

In this lesson, we want to analyze the claim made by the Bible that the gospel message is a relatively simple one and that the Scriptures likewise contain simplicity.

Ironically, both its adherents and its critics would charge the New Testament with simplicity. Critics find it to be lacking in modern sophistication, while adherents claim that God's word offers a lifestyle and pattern for salvation that is not diminished by the unwelcome complications of modern appetites. The Scriptures themselves make claims for simplicity and understandability, while allowing that there are some things that are meatier and more challenging.

Because the Bible reveals the mind of God and not the opinions and philosophies of mere men, it should be treated with great reverence. Still, it is an approachable book that can be analyzed and utilized by men.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What do the following passages reveal about the simplicity of the New Testament system?

Acts 2:40-47:

- Second Corinthians 1:12-14:

- Second Corinthians 11:1-4:

2. Are there some things in the Bible that are more challenging than others, even difficult to comprehend (Second Peter 3:14-18)? What do evil people do with such passages? How do righteous people handle the same?

3. In what languages was the Bible originally written? How can language provide another challenge to understanding God's original intent in Scripture?

4. What did the Hebrew writer advise when his audience was having difficulty understanding some of the more challenging aspects of the new covenant (Hebrews 5:9-6:3)? What was their essential problem?

5. What five things did Peter expose as detrimental to spiritual maturity (First Peter 2:1-3)? Explain what these have to do with better understanding Scripture.

3. Did Jesus teach in parables to make things easier to understand or more difficult (Matthew 13:1-17)?

4. Consider Christ's discussion with the apostles in John 16:1-13. Why were the apostles unprepared to hear everything that Jesus could tell them? How would this be rectified (Ephesians 6:17)? What kind of heart must one have to bear the things Jesus would reveal to us in his word?

5. What difficult subject did the Hebrew writer desire to broach (5:5-11)? Why was he reluctant to do so (5:12-13)?

6. List the elementary principles he notes in Hebrews 6:1-3.

7. Read Second Peter 1:1-11. What causes spiritual shortsightedness?

Lesson 5: Alleged Contradictions

In this lesson, we acknowledge that some allege there are contradictions in the Bible, but will put forth a number of possible explanations for these apparent difficulties.

Dennis McKinsey wrote in *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*, “Every analyst of the Bible should realize that the Book is a veritable miasma of contradictions, inconsistencies, inaccuracies, poor science, bad math, inaccurate geography, immoralities, degenerate heroes, false prophecies, boring repetitions, childish superstitions, silly miracles, and dry-as-dust discourse. But contradictions remain the most obvious, the most potent, the most easily proven, and the most common problem to plague the Book” (71).

It would be foolish to assert that there are no difficulties in the Bible; in fact, there are some passages that even appear to contradict others until more serious study is applied the issue. The fact, however, that two statements may be hard to reconcile does not necessarily make for a contradiction and therefore, a falsehood in what is supposed to be the product of divine inspiration. In reality, it must be proven impossible to reconcile such statements by any logical means before one should conclude that a contradiction has occurred.

If the Bible truly does contradict itself, the implication is that God is a liar, even though the Book argues that it is impossible for him to lie (Hebrews 6:18). Moreover, if there really is still a God, but the Bible contains errors, we would have to conclude that the Bible is not his revelation at all. The Bible’s claim of inspiration would be forced to the precipice of rejection.

While acknowledging Bible difficulties, some have suggested that they actually bring some benefit. First, they essentially prove that there was collusion among the writers or conspiracy to commit a fraud. Second, the alleged contradictions stimulate study as men try to prove and disprove the texts because of the sheer challenge. Third, they test the moral character of individuals, just as the parables did (Matthew 13:1-5). Honest hearts tend to exert themselves to discern truth while carnal beings lack such energy because they have no love for truth (Second Thessalonians 2:10-12).

Consider the list of alleged contradictions by John W. Haley (3-29):

1. difference in dates
2. difference in authorship
3. difference in standpoint of object
4. different principles and method of arrangement
5. different modes of computing time
6. peculiarities of Oriental idiom
7. use of several names for persons or places
8. use of same words for different meanings
9. errors in manuscripts
10. imagination or prejudice of critics

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Can you find the alleged contradiction in the following passages and offer a possible explanation?

1. Various differences between the three synoptic gospel accounts.
2. Healing of blind men of Jericho (Matthew 20:20-34, Mark 10:46-52, Luke 18:35-43).
3. Words on cross (Matthew 27:37, Mark 15:26, Luke 23:38, John 15:19).
4. Time the women arrived at Christ's sepulcher (Matthew 28:1, Mark 11:2, Luke 24:1, John 20:1).
5. Names of the women (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:1, Luke 24:10, John 20:1).
6. How many angels did women see (Matthew 28:1-5, Luke 24:4, John 20:11-12).
7. Which priest David dealt with (Mark 2:25-26, 1 Sam. 21:1).
8. Do First Corinthians 10:8 and Numbers 25:9 contradict each other?
9. How could twelve priests carry the ark across the Jordan (Joshua 3), when the ark's description in Genesis 6 would weigh tons if fully loaded?

Lesson 6: Fulfilling The Law (Matthew 5:17)

In this lesson, we will examine Christ's intention to fulfill the Old Testament Law of Moses rather than destroy it.

Few aspects of the ministry of Christ were as controversial as his treatment of the Law of Moses. To many Jews, he seemed to be a blasphemer for violating the traditions of the elders and making it plain that he would institute a new covenant and temple. Early on, he anticipated this controversy and predicted that he would fulfill rather than destroy the Law of Moses, but to those who loved the law more than grace, the difference was insignificant.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What had Jesus just begun preaching before heading up the mountain (Matthew 4:23-25)?

2. What is indicated about the kingdom in the following passages?
 - a. Matthew 4:17:

 - b. Matthew 16:28:

 - c. Matthew 24:14:

3. Now begin considering Matthew 5:17-20. What was the Lord's intention concerning the Law and Prophets? What did he anticipate would be the perception of many who heard him as he continued to teach?

4. Identify the parallel phrase used in Luke 24:44 to describe this same body of literature. What is the essential meaning of these idioms (Luke 24:27)?

5. What are some of the things that Jesus did that made it seem as if he was bent on destroying the Law of Moses (Matthew 12:1-2, 15:1-2, 24:1-2)?
6. Describe the difference between destroying the Law and fulfilling it. How did Jesus fulfill the Law rather than destroy it?
7. What was the purpose of the Law of Moses?
- a. Galatians 3:19-25:
 - b. Romans 7:7:
 - c. Romans 10:4:
8. What punctuating act allowed Jesus finally to fulfill the Law completely? How does the Holy Spirit describe the Law of Moses after this event (Ephesians 2:14-16, Colossians 2:11-17)?
9. If the Law of Moses is still in effect today, which parts of it would still be binding (James 2:10-11)? Give some examples of Hebrew laws that men would find difficult to obey today (Leviticus 9:3-7, Leviticus 11:1-3, Leviticus 24:16, Deuteronomy 24:22).

Lesson 7: Offensive Organs (Matthew 5:27-30 and 18:8-9)

In this lesson, we want to examine the perplexing teaching of Jesus Christ regarding sin and the apparent value of excising the offending organ.

At least twice in his ministry, Jesus counseled his followers to do the unthinkable, unless he was talking in some very spiritual terms. In both Matthew 5:27-30 and Matthew 18:6-14, our Savior advised the removal of offending organs and appendages to fight against temptation and sin. Was he speaking literally or metaphorically?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Can you think of anything that would be sinful about the practice of self-mutilation in general (Ephesians 5:29, First Corinthians 6:19-20, Romans 12:1-2)?
2. Using a dictionary, define the term “hair shirt.”
3. Now consider Matthew 5:27-30. What sin is under consideration? What is the real danger in committing that sin?
4. How would your hand or your eye cause you to commit this, or maybe some other, sin?

5. So what does Jesus advise that one do with the offensive organ or appendage? If this isn't meant to be taken literally, and it isn't, what kinds of things might one do to obey the spiritual intent of the command?

6. The key then must be in the matter of self-discipline. What do the following passages say about self-discipline?

a. First Corinthians 9:24-27:

b. Hebrews 12:1-2:

c. Second Peter 1:5-11:

d. Matthew 16:24:

7. Read Matthew 18:6-14. What is the context this time? Who are Christ's "little ones"?

8. What habits did the Colossians practice that were of no real value against the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:20-23)? How is Lent similar?

9. What spiritual surgery is noted earlier in Colossians 2:11-12? What is its value?

4. Think back to Deuteronomy 6:13. How were oaths to be taken? How had tradition surrounded the practice and perverted it?

5. Read Matthew 5:33-37. It appears that the Lord's doctrine is that oaths are completely forbidden in his kingdom. Still, who is swearing in the following passages?

- a. Matthew 26:63:
- b. Second Corinthians 1:23:
- c. Galatians 1:20:
- d. Hebrews 6:13:

6. It is important to take note of the contextual limitations in both passages. Jesus was dealing with a perversion of oath-taking—swearing falsely because one felt justified so long as he did not swear to God. Honest people would not seek out such escapes. What should be sufficient for his kingdom?

7. Consider James 5:12. What oaths does James condemn? Are judicial oaths condemned? Should one make casual oaths in conversation with no real regard for God's name being invoked?

8. The point is to create a group of people who are honest, who do not swear falsely, but make promises and keep them. How did this subject arise again with the Corinthian church (Second Corinthians 1:15-22)?

Lesson 9: Love Your Enemies (Matthew 5:38-48)

The teaching of Jesus in response to the custom of “an eye for an eye” seems to make for a very passive, defenseless discipleship. Again, however, context is everything.

As Jesus continued to preach his sermon on the mount, he turned to the part of the law that dealt with personal vengeance and permitted only an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth as its standard. Throughout their history, and especially in the first century, the Jews were surrounded by their enemies. A certain hatred of them had developed that would be completely unwelcome in the kingdom of Christ and so Jesus set about reversing centuries of spiritual decline.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What had the Lord’s audience heard concerning the matter of personal retaliation (Matthew 5:38)? Consider Exodus 21:22-25. Was the intent to motivate people to avenge themselves or was the goal something else?

2. In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus gives four examples of the way that he expects his disciples to treat those who are wronging them. List them here:

a. Verse 39:

b. Verse 40:

c. Verse 41:

d. Verse 42:

3. Take each of these and paint a picture of the man who would foolishly observe them out of context and without limitation.

4. Instead of viewing Matthew 5:43 as the beginning of a new topic, allow it to summarize the verses that precede it. What attitude is Jesus trying to inspire toward the disciples' enemies?

5. Think about the way that we respond when people are mean or violent toward us. What good is accomplished when we respond to anger with wrath (James 1:19-20)?

6. How should disciples respond to angry words, menacing gestures and invitations to quarrel (Romans 12:17-21)? How might pride interfere?

7. What does Matthew 5:39 have to do with protecting one's children or perhaps others from imminent physical harm?

8. The threatened loss of a tunic is also occasion for a change in people's attitudes about things and their rights. What did Paul suggest for certain instances when things were at stake (First Corinthians 6:1-7)?

9. What statement does going the extra mile make?

10. Does Matthew 5:42 require us to lend everything we have to anybody who asks for it? What other scriptural limitations should be included in the broader context of the command (Second Thessalonians 3:10, First Timothy 5:8)?

Lesson 10: Showbread (Matthew 12:1-10)

In this lesson, we will examine the incident in which the hungry disciples of Jesus plucked heads of grain to eat on the Sabbath and were accused of sin by the Pharisees. Many today look at this as validation of situation ethics.

Ethics is the study of right and wrong and the quest for a standard by which the two can be distinguished is the source of great controversy. For those who reject the Bible as the word of God, many false standards are available, but even the Christians is often tempted to substitute a lesser model for the demanding perfection of God's word.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In class, we will discuss five schools of ethics. During the discussion, make notes about each.

- a. Antinomianism

- b. Generalism

- c. Situationism

- d. Non-conflicting Absolutism

- e. Hierarchicalism

2. Consider Matthew 12:1-8. Many cite this event as evidence that Jesus advocated generalism, situation ethics or hierarchicalism. What exactly did the disciples do to upset the Pharisees?

3. The first important question to answer concerns whether or not they were actually breaking the law. Were they (Deuteronomy 23:25, Exodus 20:8-11, 35:2-3)? What were they violating (Matthew 15:1-9, 23:23-24)?

4. Jesus defends his disciples by reminding their accusers of a similar incident in Old Testament history. What had David done in 1 Samuel 21:1-6? Is Jesus saying that David's actions were justified—that breaking the law was right in that situation?

5. What did the priests do on the Sabbath that “profaned” it (Numbers 28:1-9). Why could the priests get away with doing this?

6. Where did the priests do their service under Moses? What is the body of Christ (John 2:21)?

7. Why were the disciples considered guiltless?

8. Describe some circumstances in which we are tempted to employ situation ethics, generalism or hierarchicalism. What is our ethic?

Lesson 11: Three Days and Nights (Matthew 12:40)

In this lesson, we will examine the prophecy of Jesus Christ relating to the duration of his stay in the tomb. Was he actually crucified on Wednesday and resurrected on Saturday, precisely 72 hours after his crucifixion?

The scribes and Pharisees were not genuine listeners when it came to the gospel. Even when witness to a noteworthy miracle, they found it possible to cast aspersions on the healer and attribute his power to Satan. Even more disingenuously, they asked to see another sign, but instead of appeasing their insincere wish, Jesus predicted his own resurrection from the tomb they would help put him in.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider Matthew 12:22-37. Whom did Jesus heal? How did the Pharisees react?
2. How did Jesus rebuke his critics? Of what did he accuse them?
3. What request do the scribes and Pharisees make after rejecting the healing of the blind and mute man? How does this request compare to the one made by those who ate the loaves and fishes (John 6:10-15, 22-31)?
4. What is “the sign of the prophet Jonah”?

5. On which day does the Bible indicate that Jesus was crucified (Mark 15:42, Luke 23:54, John 19:31)? On which day does it indicate that Jesus was resurrected (Matthew 28:1, Mark 16:2 Luke 24:1, John 20:1)?

6. What is the apparent contradiction, then, between the Lord's prediction and what the Bible says actually happened?

7. Is it possible that "three days and three nights" is not necessarily synonymous with 72 precise hours? Consider Genesis 42:14-21, Second Chronicles 10:5,12 and Esther 4:16-5:1.

8. Also, we can compare the prediction of Matthew 12:40 with other statements to determine that he never had a 72-hour period in mind. When did Jesus say he would rise (Matthew 16:21, 17:23, 10:19, Luke 9:22, 24:7,46)?

9. Does he contradict himself between Mark 8:31 and Mark 9:31? Explain.

10. How did his enemies perceive his meaning (Matthew 27:62-64)?

11. On which three days of the week was Jesus in the tomb?

Lesson 12: Twelve Thrones (Matthew 19:27-28)

In this lesson, we will acknowledge that some passages of Scripture are often removed from context in order to prop up the false doctrines of Premillennialism. Those passages include Christ's promise to the 12 apostles that they would sit on thrones judging Israel.

Premillennialism borrows much of its theology from the misconceptions and infidelities of people who lived in the first century. There was a common understanding that the Messiah was to be another Gideon or Samson, who would rally Israel around his charisma and might and expel the occupying Gentile forces from Palestine. Jesus never even tried to be the Zealot's model Messiah, but instead secured for all liberty from sin and eternal condemnation, not in spite of the cross, but through it. His promise to his apostles of thrones over Israel is not an indication that he still wanted to build an earthly kingdom at all.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Consider Matthew 19:16-26. The young man who came to talk with Jesus had at least two things going for him—things that would result in prominence and salvation in a divine kingdom according to most. What were those two things?

2. The kingdom Christ had in mind, however, was not so earthly in its design. What was the nature of his kingdom?

3. What more do we learn about the nature of that kingdom according to the following passages?
 - a. Luke 17:20-21:

 - b. Mark 10:13-15:

 - c. John 18:36-37:

4. Return now to Matthew 19:27 where Peter has heard Jesus say that neither meritorious works nor great riches will secure a place in his kingdom. How does Peter respond?

5. Consider the Lord's reply between verses 28-30. When would the apostles receive the reward he predicts? When is this (cf. Titus 3:5, Luke 16:16)?

6. Read Matthew 16:13-28. How do we know that Jesus intended to establish this kingdom during his ministry?

7. To what did Peter point as evidence of the kingdom's establishment (Acts 2:22-33)?

8. Return again to Matthew 19:28-29 for the Lord's answer to Peter's curiosity about the apostles' reward. What is it? What Israel is God concerned with in the covenant of Christ (Romans 2:28-29, 9:6, First Peter 2:9-10)? What authority do the apostles possess in the kingdom (Second Corinthians 5:19-20, John 16:13-14)?

Lesson 13: Review

1. What did the Bereans do instead of just accepting everything they were told as fact (Acts 17:10-12)? What did John counsel his readers to do (1 John 4:1)? How can we really begin to understand the difficult passages of the New Testament (Ephesians 3:4, 5:17; Hebrews 2:1-4, 5:9-6:3)?

2. How did Ezra prepare himself to serve God (Ezra 7:10, Nehemiah 8:1-8)?

3. What did the Hebrew writer advise when his audience was having difficulty understanding some of the more challenging aspects of the new covenant (Hebrews 5:9-6:3)? What was their essential problem?

4. Read Second Peter 1:1-11. What causes spiritual shortsightedness?

5. Explain what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:17-20 concerning the destruction or fulfillment of the Law and Prophets.

6. Explain what Jesus meant in Matthew 5:27-30 about severing certain organs and appendages from the body.

7. Read Matthew 5:33-37. It appears that the Lord's doctrine is that oaths are completely forbidden in his kingdom. Still, who is swearing in the following passages?

- a. Matthew 26:63:
- b. Second Corinthians 1:23:
- c. Galatians 1:20:
- d. Hebrews 6:13:

8. In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus gives four examples of the way that he expects his disciples to treat those who are wronging them. List them here:

- a. Verse 39:
- b. Verse 40:
- c. Verse 41:
- d. Verse 42:

9. Were the disciples breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain heads to eat (Deuteronomy 23:25, Exodus 20:8-11, 35:2-3)? What were they violating (Matthew 15:1-9, 23:23-24)?

10. How long was Jesus in the tomb? Explain.

11. When was the kingdom to be established—during the first century or at some later date when Jesus returned to try again after failing the first time?

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