

(Part One)

"The Bible can mean anything you want it to mean" is a common enough claim and there is a sense in which that is true.

The Bible can be made to say anything you want it to say if you approach it with a certain frame of mind that fails to observe some basic rules of interpretation.

The existence of cults confirms how a bad interpretation of Scripture produces bad results. And even "mainstream" Christians sometimes have beliefs and practices that owe their existence to a wrong interpretation of Scripture.

So how can we interpret the Bible correctly?

When we come to Scripture we must do so in a spirit of humility and dependence upon the Holy Spirit. The author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit and he is its best interpreter.

We need to keep the following scriptures ever before us:

2 Timothy 3:16-17

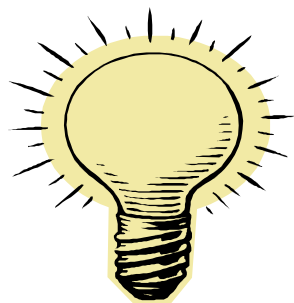
"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

1 Peter 1:10-11

"Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow."

2 Peter 1:21

"Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."



Divine Enlightenment

We must come to the Bible, not to have our opinions confirmed, our prejudices reinforced, our pet issues endorsed, or our "proof texts" approved, but to hear the voice of God and learn of his will for our life.

We must have a spirit of obedience and submission to the authority of his word each time we read the Bible.

The attitude of the Psalmist is one we would do well to imitate:

**Psalm 119:18**

"Open my eyes," he says, "that I may see wonderful things in your law."

The psalmist is asking for enlightenment, for insight, for understanding; he is asking God to reveal his will.

Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit we will remain in darkness and not know the meaning of the Scriptures. Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus whose mind the Lord opened so they could understand the Scriptures, we too need our mind to be opened by the Lord. (Luke 24:32)

But we must also exercise our mind through reflecting and meditating upon what God has said. A blessing is pronounced upon the man whose "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night." (Psalms 1:2)

This man is engaged in prayerful reflection upon the word. God's people have always sought spiritual enlightenment.

A very perplexed prophet sought insight into what God had said and an angel came in answer to his prayer and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them." (Daniel 10:12).

Paul gives this instruction to Timothy: "Reflect" he says, "on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this." (2 Timothy 2:7)

And to the community of believers in Philippi he says, "And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you." (Philippians 3:15)

The use of our mind, along with the guidance of the Spirit, is indispensable in our interpretation of the Bible.



(Part Two)

The importance of interpreting the Bible correctly can be illustrated by the story of a very discouraged man who decided to seek comfort from the Bible.

He randomly opened the Bible and placed his finger on a verse in the hope that it would say something uplifting. His finger landed on **Matthew 27:5**, which said, "**Then Judas went away and hanged himself.**"

Finding no comfort there he repeated the procedure. This time his finger landed on **John 13:27** which said, "**What you are about to do, do quickly.**"

When Scripture is taken out of context, the results can be disastrous. Every cult and every heresy that has arisen in the church owes its origin to the misinterpretation of Scripture.

The point cannot be overstated that the context of each verse of Scripture must be respected. Here are a few examples that should prove instructive.



### The Sabbath: To Work or Not to Work?

The fourth commandment could not be stated more clearly: "**But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work...**" (Exodus 20:9-10)

There it is in black and white: "**you shall not do any work**".

### Is its meaning not obvious?

Well, not really, especially when other Scriptures are taken into consideration. It was the failure of the Pharisees on this very point that had them hurling accusations at Jesus for violating the Sabbath.

They viewed what Jesus did on the Sabbath through this one Scripture and saw him as a violator. Jesus defended himself by saying, "**Haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent?**" (Matthew 12:5)

Of the seven days in the week, the Sabbath was the busiest day for the priests, yet they were innocent of violating the law that said "**you shall not do any work**" on the Sabbath.

The problem created by the Pharisees was that they had taken this one verse of Scripture and neglected everything else God had said on the subject. As a result, they turned the Sabbath into a religious straightjacket. And Jesus had to remind them, "**The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.**" (Mark 2:27)

The Sabbath was intended by God to be a gracious blessing to his people Israel, not a religious burden as the Pharisees had made it.

### What have we learned so far?

When the law says "you shall not do any work" we have seen that it was never intended to prevent the priests doing their work on the Sabbath, nor was it intended to prohibit a work of kindness being done on the Sabbath.

Jesus performed miracles on the Sabbath, and therefore was working, to show the Pharisees that their narrow interpretation of this Scripture was wrong. (John 5:16-18) Scripture must be understood in its context and supported by other Scriptures that address the same subject. This produces a correct interpretation of Scripture.



### To Circumcise or Not to Circumcise?

The early Galatian churches were being infected with false teaching that said circumcision was necessary for one to be saved. (Acts 15:5) This teaching was an attack upon the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Having established that it is by grace, not by circumcision or any other legalistic work, that we are saved, Paul gives clear teaching on the consequences of opting for a legalistic religion: "Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law." (Galatians 5:2-3)

Paul is teaching that when the gospel is supplemented with the legalistic requirement of circumcision, it nullifies the death of Jesus for that person. Why?

Because the atoning death of Jesus is then no longer the sole object of one's faith, rather faith now focuses' on a work: circumcision. Hence his strong words "do not let yourselves be circumcised".

With that clear warning still ringing in our ears, we read of Paul recruiting Timothy to be his fellow worker. And what does Paul do? He circumcises him!

So if Paul is forbidding circumcision and also engaging in circumcision, is the great apostle contradicting himself? Is he not practising what he preaches? How do we resolve this dilemma?

Paul teaches the Galatians that circumcision is not a salvation issue. Jesus, not circumcision, is the saviour. Therefore one does not need to be circumcised in order to be saved.

The context in which Paul forbids circumcision is when it is made a condition of salvation. But when Paul circumcises Timothy, it has nothing to do with salvation. Rather "Paul wanted to take him along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews in that area." (Acts 16:3)

This has nothing to do with salvation; it was an expedient. There is no contradiction when the context is respected.



### To Baptise or Not to Baptise?

Paul's words to the Corinthians have created needless confusion among Christian people but they serve to show how important it is to have a proper method of interpreting the Scriptures.

Paul said, "For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel..." (1 Corinthians 1:17)

What are we to make of his words?

Is Paul playing down the importance of baptism as a response to the gospel?

Or are we to believe that Jesus gave him a commission that differed from the one given to the disciples before ascending to heaven when he said, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"? (Matthew 28:18-19)

If we take Paul's words without due respect to their context we create an enormous problem by presuming Paul contradicts himself and the whole tenor of Scripture on the subject of baptism.

If Paul was not sent to baptise, then we have to ask some searching questions.

Why did he baptise some believers in Corinth when he was not to baptise?

"I am thankful," he says, "that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius... I also baptised the household of Stephanas." (1 Corinthians 1:14-16)

When Paul baptised these people was he being disobedient to Christ?

Furthermore, why did Paul take some of those disciples who had received John the Baptist's baptism and re-immerser them? (Acts 19:1-5)

This is very strange behaviour for a man who was not sent to baptise. Or was he not sent to baptise only in Corinth?

And if Paul was not sent to baptise, is that not strange for a man who himself submitted to baptism and called upon the Lord to save him from his sins? (Acts 22:16)

Paul's words are found in the middle of a discussion about division in the church at Corinth. The believers had divided themselves into factions.

"I follow Paul", "I follow Apollos", "I follow Cephas", "I follow Christ". (1 Corinthians 1:12)

Because of the divisive spirit within the church, Paul is glad not to have baptised any of them "so that no one can say you were baptised into my name" (1 Corinthians 1:15) and then claim that they belonged to Paul and not to the Christ who died for them.

Paul saw that if he had baptised many of the believers this might contribute further to the problem of division and for this reason he said that Jesus didn't send him to baptise – that is, not to form a sectarian party in his own name.

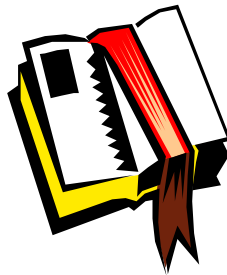
### Summary

When the Bible says "you shall not do any work" on the Sabbath, it does not mean that work of every kind must cease.

When the Bible says "if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you", it does not mean circumcision is prohibited in all circumstances.

And when the Bible says, "Christ did not send me to baptise", it is not minimising the importance of baptism as a response to the gospel.

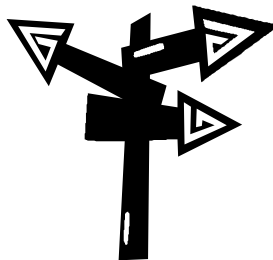
So how are we to correctly interpret Scripture? Context, context, context.



(Part Three)

God has revealed his will in the Scriptures with the obvious intention of being understood. So when we read the Bible we need to know if we are reading historical narrative, poetry, psalms, prophecy, doctrine or an account of the life of Jesus.

Furthermore, we need to appreciate the distinctive style of each writer and the cultural background against which he wrote.



### Some Guiding Principles

There are "tools" we can use to ensure that we arrive at a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. For example, if you were interpreting the epistles the following must be kept in mind:

1. To whom was the letter written?
2. What was the purpose of the letter?
3. How would the recipient of the letter have understood it?
4. What is the obvious meaning of the text?
5. What is the context of the text?
6. Is the text written with a particular culture in mind?
7. Is the interpretation in harmony with the rest of Scripture?
8. A text always means what the author intended it to mean.

Let's look at a few examples that show the importance of applying these tools. Both James and Paul find a common ally in Abraham to support what they are teaching.

Paul sees in Abraham the perfect example of a man justified by faith apart from works while James sees in Abraham the perfect example of a man justified by faith that works. (**Romans 4:1-3; James 2:21-24**)

Both men can legitimately call upon Abraham for the support they need in what they are teaching. Paul is refuting the legalism that was creeping into the church; a legalism that taught that one could not be saved unless one performed works.

This teaching, though well intentioned, was an attack upon the gospel that claims the death of Jesus is the only basis of our salvation. James, on the other hand, teaches that a living faith can be seen because it is an active faith.

The faith of Abraham responded in obedience to the command of God to offer up his son Isaac. James sees in this incident a living faith, responding to the commands of God, while Paul is teaching that works (**meritorious deeds done in an attempt to earn God's favour**) have no part in our salvation.

Paul and James are not in conflict (**as Luther thought**) once we understand the context of their teachings.

Another example is found in **Romans 6**. This chapter states that in baptism the penitent sinner is identified, by faith, with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus and becomes a new creation in Christ. But it is not Paul's primary purpose in this chapter to teach about baptism.

His main purpose is to answer the foolish question "**Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?**" (**Romans 6:1**) He does this by showing how unacceptable it is for one who has been baptised to continue living in sin: It's not impossible, but it's totally incompatible with the profession of faith made in baptism.

The emphasis of the chapter is on holy living, not on the need to be baptised, though one's need to be baptised is included. We can only see this emphasis when we ask the text the right questions and use the text only as intended by the writer.

**Philippians 2:1-11** provides another example. With utmost clarity Paul shows that Jesus is indeed God. But that is not his main point. He is concerned with showing that Jesus is God who became a servant, so that believers will see him as a model to imitate.

We will miss the instruction to live as servants if we miss the main purpose for which the text was written.

Finally, how often have we heard these words used to provide assurance when only a few turn up for the prayer meeting: **"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."** (Matthew 18:20) That the Lord is always with us is the testimony of his word. (Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 13:5-6) But the words of our Lord are stated in the context of church discipline being taken by the leaders of the church towards an impenitent sinner.

In the decision they have to take, the Lord is with them. We will gain a fuller understanding of God and his will for our lives, and in some cases avoid outright heresy and church division, if our interpretation of Scripture is the result of asking the text the right questions and attempting to understand the context of each passage. When we ask the right questions of the text we get the right answers.



(Part Four)

The Bible was never written to answer specifically every possible eventuality that may arise in life, but there are principles in Scripture that give us divine guidance concerning the issues we face today.

Jesus taught that such principles exist. He said, **"Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread – which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests."** (Matthew 12:3-4)

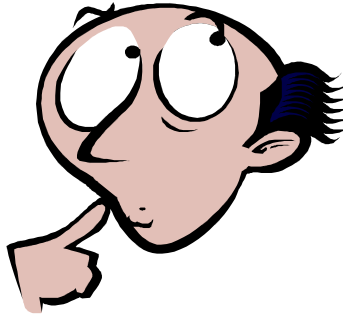
There is no doubt that those to whom Jesus spoke had read about this event many times, but never grasped the broad principle enshrined in the text. Jesus explains that human need - in this case, David relieving the hunger of himself and his men - is more important than ceremonial law. Hence his words, **"Have you not read...?"** This was a passage he expected them to understand.

The Apostle Paul understood this principle very well. In his letter to Timothy, he says that the elders who both shepherd and teach the church are to be paid for their work. (1 Timothy 5:17) **And where does Paul go for his proof text?**

Straight to **Deuteronomy 25:4**, a text with instruction for the fair treatment of an ox: **"Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain."**

Paul understood the principle that if God is concerned for the fair treatment of a working ox - that he can eat the fruit of his labour and must not be prevented from doing so - surely it follows that God is also concerned for the financial welfare of those who work in leading his church.





### Finding an Equivalent for Today

We need to learn to read the Bible with an eye open to the broader application of the text. For example, Jesus said, "And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward." (Matthew 10:42)

How can we take the words of Jesus about giving "a cup of cold water" in his name and find an acceptable equivalent for today?

I have been to Siberia on a few occasions – in winter, I might add – and I can assure you that the last thing they need is a cup of cold water.

What would be an acceptable equivalent?

Would a cup of hot soup, a warm blanket, or pair of gloves qualify?

Of course they would. The rigid, narrow approach to Scripture embraced by the Pharisees, (and by some Christians today) was the root of so many of their problems.

They would have taken the words of Jesus - "a cup of cold water" - and debated as to whether or not the water could be served in a glass, or must it only be a cup, and just how cold should the water be?

Would lukewarm water be okay?

Endless debate and discussion would have revolved around the text while the central point would have been missed entirely.

It is legitimate to move outside the actual words of Scripture in embracing a principle that harmonises with the will of God. For example, we are told, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." (Romans 12:20)

To fulfil this instruction must the needs of our enemy be met only by supplying him with groceries and beverages, or could we fulfil the teaching of this Scripture by providing him with the funds to become self-employed?

Could we fund a training course that would qualify him for gainful employment? Of course we could!

And if someone objects and says, "Where in the Bible does it say that we have the right to finance a training course for someone?" we reply by saying it is divinely enshrined in the words, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him".

The Bible teaches us that meeting man's needs is more important than ceremonial law and that being merciful to one in need is always the right thing to do.

The principles found in Scripture provide us with the authority from God to do what needs to be done in carrying out his will. And because "all Scripture is God-breathed" it is said to be "useful... for every good work". (2 Timothy 3:16)

Let us always approach Scripture with prayer, reverence and humility so that we can understand how to apply the principles taught therein.

