

***DEALING with  
DIFFICULTIES in  
SCRIPTURE***

*A beginner's guide*

*All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.*

*(2 Timothy 3:16)*

The seeming defects of the Bible are exceedingly insignificant when put in comparison with its many and marvellous excellences.

It certainly reveals great perversity of mind and heart that men spend so much time discussing and writing about such insignificant points that they consider defects in the Bible, while the incomparable beauties and wonders that glorify almost every page pass absolutely unnoticed.

A little like a man who in studying some great masterpiece of art, concentrated his whole attention upon what looked like a flyspeck in the corner.

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# INTRODUCTION

Throughout Scripture the Bible claims to be a Book totally inspired by God, trustworthy and completely free from error. By *inspired* we mean the means by which the Holy Spirit worked through human agents to produce His perfect authoritative Word, completely true in everything it affirms, whether it has to do with doctrine, history, science, prophecy or morality.

The vast majority of the thirty-nine Old Testament Books explicitly claim that they are God's direct Words to man. Phrases like *God spoke*, *God said*, and *the word of the Lord came*, occur hundreds of times in the first five historical Books alone.

And the prophets had no hesitation in saying that they were God's spokesmen and that the message they spoke was to be treated as coming directly from God Himself. The declarations of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah are all prefaced with, "*The word of the Lord came.*"

The New Testament writers were no less explicit concerning the source of their writings. The Apostle Paul, who wrote thirteen of the twenty-seven New Testament Books, not only described the Old Testament as the very oracles of God, but was equally certain about his own authority for he said:

*Anyone who claims to be a prophet or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.*

*(1Corinthians 14:37)*

And later Paul commended people who received his message, "*Not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word.*" The Apostle John, another contributor to the New Testament, began the Book of Revelation by saying that what he was about to write was the Word of God.

In his final chapter of the same Book he assured his readers that his words were, “*Trustworthy and true,*” as they were given to him by, “*The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets.*”

These are just a few examples, but in each case the writers claimed to be God’s spokesmen and said that their teaching should therefore be accepted without question as having divine authority. Obviously, this does not mean that we are to consider the biblical writers as co-authors with God, as they had nothing to do with the *origin* of the message. The Bible’s most concise statement on this is to say that, “*All Scripture is God-breathed.*”

Older versions render the last words, “*inspired by God.*” But God-breathed is a more perfect translation of the Greek word *theopneustos*, from the noun *theos* (God), and the verb *pneo* (to breath).

This means the Bible was not inspired in the same way an artist or singer would be inspired in today’s common language. It was *God-breathed*; it claims to be God’s very Word that has come from His own mouth. This is why Peter was able to say that prophecy never had its origin in the will of man:

*First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.*

(2 Peter 1:20-21)

All of this tells us the biblical writings are writings of divine Revelation and, in a certain sense, this should not surprise us. It is only logical to say that, if an infinitely personal God exists, He is by nature greater and high above all human understanding, and that finite human beings could not begin to understand Him unless He had revealed Himself to us. As C.S. Lewis wrote: “If He can be

known at all, it will be by self-revelation on His part, not speculation on ours.”

Yet in spite of what the Bible affirms as to its origin, and the indisputable evidence we have today bearing witness to its prophetic, scientific and historic accuracy, many people totally reject the inspiration of the Bible in the false belief that it is full of errors and contradictions.

In this book we will examine some of these alleged errors and contradictions in detail. Before doing this, however, it is important to point out that, from the very nature of the case, difficulties when studying the Word of God are to be expected.

The Bible is a Revelation of the mind, will and character of an infinitely, perfectly wise and Holy God. But this Revelation is given to human beings, imperfect in intellectual development, knowledge, character and spiritual discernment.

Even Christians have at some stage encountered problems in Scripture that seemed impossible to reconcile with other biblical facts, and were led to question if the Bible was, after all, the Word of God.

Having said this, it is also true that many of these problems have occurred more with superficial readers of Scripture than with profound students and earnest seekers of truth. Believers who have learned to study and meditate upon the Word day and night, year after year, are never discouraged by difficulties they may encounter. Every year of study finds these difficulties and apparent contradictions disappearing more and more rapidly.

Finally, many of the allegations made against the divine inspiration of Scripture are not only based on sheer prejudice most of the time, but on a failure to recognize some basic principles when interpreting ancient literature.

Many years ago the literary genius Samuel Taylor Coleridge established the golden rule for one to apply when he encounters an apparent error in a good author. He wrote:

When we meet an apparent error in a good author we are to see ourselves ignorant of his understanding until we are certain that we understand his ignorance.

Keeping this rule in mind, we will examine in this book a few basic rules and principles to remember when studying Scripture. This will help you see there are no real errors and contradictions in God's Word after all, but that the difficulties are due to our own ignorance and limited understanding.

# 01

## ***PRINCIPLES TO REMEMBER***

### *Differences Do Not Constitute Contradictions*

An important point to remember when interpreting a piece of ancient literature, in this case the Bible, is that differences do not constitute contradictions. Writers have the right to omit or include those facts that fit their purposes and to exclude those that do not. When Bible critics reject this principle, they are applying an unjust standard to biblical writers that they would not apply to others. An example of an apparent contradiction comes from the Gospel of Matthew in his account of the two demoniacs that were healed by Jesus. We read:

*When he arrived at the other side in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon-possessed men coming from the tombs met him. They were so violent that no-one could pass that way.*

*(Matthew 8:28)*

In the same account the Gospel writers Mark and Luke speak of only one demoniac while Matthew speaks of two. On the surface this may appear a contradiction between the biblical writers, but in reality, they are actually complimenting each other. Even when the Gospel writers gave Jesus' words exactly, they did not always claim to record *everything* that He said and did. The four Gospels and Epistles relate the same stories and doctrines in different ways to different people.



In the above passage Matthew is giving a full report of the healing of the two demoniacs, while Luke and Mark are giving a report that focuses on the more prominent of the two. It is well that they were given in this way; for it is one of the many incidental proofs that the Gospels are independent of each other and were not composed by writers who were in collusion with one another.

Another example of an apparent contradiction can be found in the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But again, these differences in the four accounts are in themselves proof of the accuracy of each writer and disappear upon careful study.

If four people sat down in collusion to invent a story of a resurrection that never occurred, they would have made their four accounts appear to agree, at least on the surface. And whatever contradictions there might be would only come out after minute and careful study.

In the Gospels, however, the case is just the opposite. It is all on the surface that the apparent contradictions occur, and only through careful and protracted study does the real agreement shine forth; the kind of harmony that would not exist between four fabricated accounts written in collusion. What we have said here can apply to all other apparent discrepancies of this nature in the Bible.

### *The Bible Does Not Approve of all It Records*

Failure to recognize that not everything contained in Scripture is commended by God is another chief error of those who find fault. They fail to see that the recording of the gross sins of God's chosen people, their leaders and the biblical writers themselves, are some of the many proofs of the origin of the Bible. Throughout Scripture the inconsistencies and shortcomings of all biblical characters are revealed.

None of the great Jewish heroes: David, Moses, Elijah, and the greatest of Israel's kings are presented without blemish. This is a radical difference between biblical biographers and other writers, whose normal tendency is to protect their reputation by reducing their failures and weaknesses. In contrast, the Bible deals openly with the sins of its characters and authors, even when this reflects badly on God's people.

Take for example King David; unless the writer had been inspired by the Holy Spirit he would have concealed, or at least tried to palliate, this vile act of their greatest hero of that time. Instead, the event is portrayed in all its hideousness and sinfulness, just as it occurred.

Likewise, the New Testament contains some very embarrassing material about the disciples and hard to explain sayings of Jesus that most certainly would have been edited out if the writers had had the freedom to manipulate the records.

Yet, as can be seen from Scripture, the New Testament Evangelists paint their own faults and those of the Apostles because they recorded the events exactly as they occurred. Below are just a few examples:

*But when Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*

*(Galatians 2:11-14)*

*Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worst. For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.*

*(1Corinthians 11:17-19)*

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife.*

*(1Corinthians 5:1-2)*

*After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you." Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed. Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.*

*(Matthew 26:73-75)*

The truth of Scripture is found in what it reveals and not in all that it records. If we do not learn to distinguish between these two, we might be led to the conclusion that the Word of God teaches immorality, murder, polygamy and so forth.

The Bible focuses on reality and presents the good with the bad, the worst with the best and the right with the wrong. This is because the writers were committed to reporting the truth even when it was uncomfortable for them, and because the ultimate author is God Himself, *who cannot lie*.

## God Used Different Personalities

Inspiration of Scripture does not exclude the Holy Spirit using a variety of people who have different literary styles, forms of expression that are part of the individual's vocabulary, and forms of thought to which the individual is accustomed. The traditional biblical writers came from all walks of life and included prophets, generals, kings, poets, musicians, doctors, scholars, taxmen, statesmen and fishermen.

But it is obvious from the way in which their writings reveal their own character, style and culture that these human writers were not being used in the same way as computers or typewriters are used to record messages.

God used this great variety of men to write exactly what He wanted them to record, and at the same time used their unique vocabulary, personality and individuality to convey His message completely free from error. This would explain, for instance, why the Apostle Paul always uses Pauline language, and the Apostle John, Johannine language.

## Inerrancy Applies Only to the Originals

As we have already pointed out, the Bible claims to be the inspired Word of God to man. And if this is true then we must logically assume that the Bible is completely truthful and without error. The very character of God demands this. Jesus said of God's utterances, "*Your word is truth*" (John 17:17) and the Psalmist wrote, "*All your words are true*" (Psalm 119:160).

The doctrine that has persisted throughout the centuries of Church history, and that is common among evangelical Christians today, is that the Scriptures as originally given were absolutely infallible and inerrant, and that our English translation is a substantially accurate rendering of the originals.

As is the case with all ancient literature, we do not possess the original manuscripts of our Bible. And even though the original manuscripts were copied many times with great care and exactness, naturally one or two small errors crept into these copies.

This occurred because when our authorized version was made, some of the best manuscripts were not within reach of the translators and so the translation was made from an imperfect text. An example of such an error comes from the Gospel of John in the following text:

*Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda, having five porches. In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatever disease he had.*

*(John 5:2-5)*

For a number of reasons this statement seems very improbable and difficult to believe, but upon close investigation we find that it is nothing more than a gross mistake of the copyist. Some earlier scribes added an explanation of the healing properties of the intermittent medical springs into the margin which a later copyist incorporated into the body of the text.

Another example of copyist mistakes comes from the discrepancies in figures in different accounts of the same event recorded in the Book of Kings and Chronicles. These differences can be seen in the different ages of some of Israel's kings, which would be very easy to make since the Hebrew numbers are made by letters, and letters that appear very much alike have a very different value as numbers.

For example, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet denotes one, and with two little points above it, it denotes a thousand. So a very slight error of the copyist would make a drastic change in the value of the numbers.

The remarkable fact, however, is that so few errors of this kind have been made. We now possess so many copies of the Bible that by comparing them one with the other, we can accurately tell with great precision just what the original text was.

And while each of these manuscripts differ slightly, as one would expect, the differences are minor, not major. In fact, the original text is now settled and there is not one important doctrine that depends on any doubtful reading of the text. Prolific author and Gold Award winner Dr Ron Rhodes supplies the following New Testament illustration:

Manuscript 1. **J**esus Christ is the Redeemer of the whole **worl**...

Manuscript 2. **C**hrist Jesus is the Redeemer of the whole world...

Manuscript 3. Jesus Christ s the Redeemer of the whole world...

Manuscript 4. Jesus Christ is **th** Redeemer of the **whle** world...

Manuscript 5. Jesus Christ is the Redeemer of the whole **wrld**...

By comparing the various copies of each manuscript as shown in the sample above, we are able to reconstruct the original manuscript to an accuracy of more than 99 per-cent, with the remaining uncertainties being insignificant.

## What Cannot Be Explained Is Not Unexplainable

It is a serious mistake to assume that what cannot be explained is unexplainable, and that a grave objection to a doctrine proves that doctrine to be untrue. Most people will agree that there are very few scientific doctrines believed today that did not undergo some great difficulties in the way of their initial acceptance.

On the contrary, nearly all of the mysteries of the Universe to date have yielded their explanations only to the relentless pursuit of much research and study.

Likewise, when a Bible student encounters something for which he has no explanation, he should continue to do research in the belief that an answer will eventually be found.

We can also be encouraged by the fact that many of the alleged errors in Scripture have already been proven true from the many discoveries of archaeological, historical and scientific information over the last few centuries. Dr Gleason Archer gives his reassuring testimony to the issue:

As I have dealt with one apparent discrepancy after another and have studied the alleged contradictions between the biblical record and the evidence of linguistics, archaeology or science, my trustworthiness of Scripture has been repeatedly verified and strengthened by the discovery that almost every problem in Scripture that has ever been discovered by man, from ancient times until now, has been dealt with in a completely satisfactory manner by the biblical text itself, or else by objective archaeological information.

This gives us full confidence that problems currently unresolved for lack of data will eventually have a similar outcome. We can also say that God's infinite wisdom may have a very easy solution to that which our limited minds and ignorance appears unexplainable.

### We Have Defective Knowledge

Other difficulties arise from our defective knowledge of history, geography, and customs of biblical times. For example, in the Book of Acts Luke speaks of the *proconsul* of Cyprus. Roman provinces were of two classes, *imperial* and *senatorial*. The ruler of an imperial province was called a *propraetor*, and the ruler of a senatorial province a *proconsul*.

Up to the last century, according to the best historical information at hand, Cyprus was an imperial province, and therefore its ruler would have to be a *propraetor*, but Luke calls him a *proconsul*. This clearly seemed like an error on the writer's part until archaeological investigation brought to light that, just around the time Luke wrote, the senate had made an exchange with the emperor whereby Cyprus had become a *senatorial* province, and therefore its ruler a *proconsul*. So the Bible was proved right after all and the literary critics were themselves in error.

### We May Be Ignorant of Conditions

Other problems have arisen from ignorance or lack of knowledge regarding the conditions under which many of the Books of the Bible were written and commands given. The extermination of the Canaanites may appear cruel and horrible to some, but when we understand the moral condition to which these nations had fallen,



and the utter hopelessness of reclaiming them, their extermination seems to have been an act of mercy to all succeeding generations.

### *We May Have Dull Spiritual Perception*

Even the man far advanced spiritually is still immature and cannot expect to see things as a Holy God would see them, unless he accepts it upon simple faith. An example of this is the doctrine of eternal punishment, which often appears untrue or impossible even to mature Christians.

The whole problem arises from the fact that the best of us are still so spiritually blind that we have no adequate conception of the awfulness of sin and of our rejection of the glorious Son of God. Of this the Apostle John wrote:

*And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement; about sin because they do not believe in me.*

*(John 16:8-10)*

Notice that the sin of which the Holy Spirit convinces men is not the sin of murder, adultery, or other; it is the sin of unbelief and rejection of Jesus Christ, which clearly reveals man's rebellion, ingratitude and daring defiance against God. When we become more like the Lord in our thinking and see as He sees, we will have no difficulty whatsoever with the doctrine of eternal punishment, or any other doctrine in the Bible.

# 02

## ***WHAT NOT TO DO***

### *Do Not Interpret a Text out of Context*

A gross error when interpreting biblical literature comes from a failure to note the meaning of a given text or verse in light of its context. Although the Bible was written in different periods, places, languages, and by different people, it presents a single unfolding story – God’s redemption of human beings through His Son Jesus Christ.

So just as any part of the human body can only be properly explained in reference to the whole body, each statement of Scripture must be interpreted in light of its context, each paragraph in reference to the Book in which it is found, and each Book or Epistle, in reference to the whole Bible.

When we do not apply this principle, some passages of Scripture will appear to contradict other passages in the same text or elsewhere in the Bible. Consider the following dialogue where Jesus challenges a rich young man concerning material wealth and God’s kingdom:

*As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered, “No-one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honour your father and mother.” “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”*

*Jesus looked at him and loved him. "One thing you lack" he said. "Go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me." At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.*

*Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

*(Mark 10:17-26)*

Now this passage of Scripture seems to be in stark contrast with other passages of the Bible where one of God's blessings to godly men was material wealth:

*So he said, "I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys."*

*(Genesis 24:34-36)*

*I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honour all your life; no other king shall compare with you.*

*(1Kings 3:13-14)*

One thing you will notice from the study of Scripture is that Jesus did not demand that Zacchaeus or other rich men in the Bible sell all of their possessions before they could follow Him. The problem with this rich young man in question is that his money had become his god; as can be seen from the fact that he chose to reject Jesus' instructions if it was going to cost him his possessions.

The Lord's difficult answer to sell all and follow Him was to show the man that he had broken the very first of God's commandments which says:

*I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery, you shall have no other god before me.*

*(Exodus 20:2-4)*

The young man was under the illusion that he had kept all of the commandments from his youth, but that was not the case. His money had become his god and had to be dethroned if Christ was to become his Lord. So, in context, Jesus is not speaking against being rich, but against greed and covetousness, which He also warned against elsewhere in Scripture:

*No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.*

*(Matthew 6:24)*

### *Never Build a Doctrine on Obscure Passages*

Some passages of Scripture can at times be a little obscure and quite hard to understand. This might be because the key word in the text is used only once and is difficult to interpret, unless it can be understood from the context.

In other situations the words are clear, but the meaning is difficult to understand because we are not sure as to what the author is referring, and the passage in question is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. For example, Paul wrote to the Church at Corinth:

*Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?*

*(1Corinthians 15:29-30)*

The above passage is the only reference in Scripture to this custom of being baptized for the dead and so is quite difficult to understand. Is the Apostle referring to living representatives for those who have died in order to ensure their salvation, or is he referring to the believer's spiritual baptism into his own death and burial with Christ?

Or does Paul use the term *baptism for the dead* to refer to those who have been martyred for their faith in Christ? Jesus certainly applied the term to Himself to describe His suffering and death when He said:

*Ye know not what ye ask. Are you able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of or of the baptism that I am baptised with.*

*(Matthew 20:22)*

Even if it is quite hard to understand what Paul is saying here, we know that this is not an endorsement for baptizing living people for the dead, and there is a lot of scriptural evidence for rejecting this practice.

First, water baptism has no saving power even for those who are alive, unless it is preceded by repentance, so it certainly could not help someone who had died. Once a person dies and enters into eternity without Christ, there is absolutely no way to alter his destination.

Some scholars have suggested that in Paul's time there was a custom among heretics in which people were baptized on behalf of those who had died without baptism. This custom is still practiced by the Mormons today and they use the above verse of Scripture as a warrant for their practice. But as we have just mentioned, this is not a custom that the Bible commands or sanctions, and the great Apostle was certainly not sanctioning it here.

Paul could simply be referring to it as existing, and he referred to those who practiced it as showing that they believed in the resurrection, for otherwise the baptism for the dead would have no significance.

If Paul had wanted us to follow this custom, he most certainly would have said more about it than he did, or he would have at least endorsed it. But not only did he not endorse the custom, he actually separated himself and those to whom he wrote from it when he said: “What will *they* do who are baptized for the dead?” When we meet an obscure passage like this we should never make the error of building a doctrine on it. When something is important in Scripture, it will be clearly taught in more than one place.

*Never Build a Doctrine on Passages that Oppose  
Other Plain Teaching in Scripture*

Some passages of Scripture are hard to understand because they appear to contradict other passages of Scripture which speak on the same topic. For example, James appears to say that salvation is based on human works, whereas Paul insists that salvation is obtained through faith in Christ alone, and not through works or human effort:

*What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

*(James 2:14-18)*

*But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.*

*(James 2:18-19)*

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*

*(Ephesians 2:8-10)*

*For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law.” Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law; for, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”*

*(Galatians 3:10-12)*

This difficulty in the Bible is more apparent than real. One of the great words that the New Testament uses to describe the Christian salvation is *justification* (*Romans 5:1, 8:30*). This is a legal term and literally means that a person trusting in the finished work of Christ is acquitted at God’s Judgement Seat.

Faith in Christ means that His perfect obedience in life and death is imputed to the believer at the moment we accept the Gospel truth and will stand to our credit on Judgement Day.

The Apostle Paul glorified in this universal offer of salvation through faith, because it was a message of power to save the worst and most unworthy of men and women, regardless of who they were, or what they had been or done before coming to repentance. Yet when it came to the question of *how* that salvation could be appropriated, he was unchangeable in his insistence that salvation is a gift of God’s grace.

Therefore, the biblical references which link salvation to good deeds, or *works of the law*, should not be interpreted in such a way that puts this fundamental doctrine in dispute.

Faith in Christ is not merely something external, but means being united to Him in such a way that our whole life is bound up in His. As a result of this union, there should inevitably be some moral change in our life and character.

We cannot claim to be Christians walking in faith without having something of the righteous nature of our precious Saviour being manifest in the way we live and behave.

Our actions are an indication of our inner faith says James above, and can be used to determine where we stand with the Lord; or if we stand with Him at all!

Therefore, to summarize what we have just said, James and Paul do not disagree in their teaching on salvation, but approach the same subject from different perspectives. Paul plainly emphasized that justification is by faith alone and James agrees with him, but puts emphasis on the fact that genuine faith in the Lord should produce actions.

Paul actually says the same thing in many of his writings. Immediately after telling us in his Letter to the Ephesians that we are saved by faith not works, he goes on to say that we were, “*Created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life*” (Ephesians 2:10).

However, these are “*works of faith,*” the direct fruits of being united with Christ through the Holy Spirit. They do not represent any virtuous human attainments that could become the basis for our salvation, but are offered to God in gratitude for all He has already done for us in Christ (see *1Thessalonians 1:3*; *2Thessalonians 1:11*).



When our hearts are truly converted, we see it a privilege and an honour to be even allowed to serve Jesus, or to suffer reproach and great loss for our allegiance to Him (*Luke 17:10; Acts 5:41*).

God designed our salvation in this way so as to totally eliminate any boasting, bragging or pride from man about his holiness or spiritual accomplishments, and so that all the praise and glory would go to Him alone, because He alone is worthy (see *Luke 18:9-15; Romans 3:27; 1Corinthians 1:31; Ephesians 2:9*).

This of course does not mean that a Christian does not, or cannot, sin. On the contrary, it is a common testimony that it is only after conversion that a believer begins to see how deeply sin is entrenched in his whole intellectual, emotional and discretionary nature. But, nevertheless, the child of God, walking in obedience to Christ, is being changed slowly but surely from, “*One degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.*”

### **A Prime Example**

A good example of interpreting Scripture out of context, and building a doctrine on a passage that opposes other plain and important teaching in the Bible, comes from the following words of Jesus to the Apostle Peter:

*Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”*

*(Matthew 16:17-20)*

Throughout the history of Christianity no other words have been so much misunderstood and misapplied as these. They have been used to teach that Peter was the rock upon which Christ would build His Church, even though this clearly violates scriptural teaching that Jesus, the Messiah, is the Rock, and only foundation of the Church:

*By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Christ Jesus.*

*(1Corinthians 3:10-12)*

*Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scripture: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; and this was the Lord's doing and it is amazing in our eyes.'"*

*(Matthew 21:42)*

There are two different Greek words used for Peter and rock in *Matthew 16:18* quoted above. Peter's name in Greek is *Petros*, meaning a *piece of rock*. In contrast, the word translated *rock* in the same passage is *Petra*, which signifies a massive *rock*, which certainly refers to Jesus Christ the *Chief Cornerstone*.

Peter had just confessed, through a revelation given him by the Holy Spirit in that moment, that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God, and it was upon *this truth* that Jesus would build His Church. It is as though Jesus had said to Peter, "You are rightly called by the name Peter, or rock, because you have confessed that powerful truth on which, as on a rock, I will build my Church."

However, by his faith in Jesus as the Christ and by his confession of Him as such to the world, Peter became a *piece* of the rock, and a *part* of the foundation upon which the Church is built. The Apostle Paul confirms this when he wrote:

*Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*

*(Ephesians 2:19-21)*

Notice that in the above quotation Paul states that *all* the apostles are part of the foundation stone of Christ's Church, and the same Scripture again mentions Jesus as the *Chief Cornerstone* (see also *1 Peter 2:6-8*).

## **The Keys to the Kingdom**

Having established the true meaning of the word rock in Jesus' statement to Peter, what are we to understand when we read the promise which He makes to him concerning the keys to the Kingdom?

*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*(Matthew 16:19-20)*

Also these words have been mistakenly interpreted to mean that Jesus gave Peter the right to admit souls into the Kingdom of Heaven, and that he was given primacy over the rest of the Apostles. But throughout Scripture such an office is the special prerogative of Jesus Himself:

*These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens.*

*(Revelation 3:7)*

*I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.*

*(Revelation 1:17c-19)*

Moreover, the promise Jesus made to Peter, He made to all the Apostles on other occasions (see *Matthew 18:18-19; John 20:23-24*). When anyone studied under a Jewish rabbi, it was the custom of the rabbi to give him a key when he had passed his examination for the high position of a doctor of the Law, meaning that he had become perfect in the doctrine and was able to unlock the secrets of the Kingdom to others. Jesus words to Peter in Matthew refers to this custom.

*Note that the Bible Sometimes Uses Non-Technical,  
Figurative and Symbolic Language*

Sometimes problems can arise from the language in which the Scriptures were written. Just because a term in the Bible is not scientific, it does not necessarily indicate that it is in error.

The Word of God is a Book for all ages and people and therefore written in the language that would be understood by all – the language of the common people.

It was not written in the terminology of modern science – although it does demonstrate tremendous scientific foreknowledge – but in the way certain events appeared to those who saw them and in the language idioms of that time.

The Bible also makes claims that it should be understood mostly by plain reading and does not contain secret codes or mystical teachings that are hard to understand.

When figurative language is used to describe certain characters and events, usually the context will dictate whether we should take the term literally or figuratively.

Likewise, when symbols are used, they are explained either in the context, in another part of the Book, or in other Books of the Bible. For example, the woman of Revelation chapter 17 is clearly explained further on as being a symbol of the great city that was ruling over the ancient world of that time – the city of Rome itself:

*The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.*

*(Revelation 17:18)*

Finally, sometimes biblical descriptions may appear symbolic, but are really the ancient prophets trying to describe their divine visions of twenty-first century prophetic phenomenon. Think of the beloved Apostle John in the Book of Revelation, seeing World War 3, with all its modern weapons and machinery, and trying to describe it with first-century knowledge and language.