

## LESSON THREE

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### HOW TO INTERPRET THE BIBLE

It is almost a universal idea that the Bible is hard to understand and must be changed to be understood; and that it is full of mysteries, secrets, and hidden meanings veiled in spiritual language which only a few special men of God can understand. Some believe that the Bible has many different meanings, that one man's interpretation is as good as another, and that one can prove anything by the Bible. How far from truth are such ideas! Not one of them even verges on the truth. *The following is truth:*

#### I. The Bible is the Simplest Book to Understand

This sounds ridiculous to the average person, but if you will stop to consider a few simple facts you will change your mind and see how sensible such a conclusion is. *The reasons for this claim are:*

1. **BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS A REVELATION.** We have seen in Lesson Two, Point VI, that the Bible is an inspired revelation from God. A revelation is an uncovering or unveiling so that all can see alike what was previously covered or hidden. The only excuse any man would have for not seeing something that was uncovered for him is his willful refusal to look. Anything that is revealed is clear, or the purpose of the revelation has failed.

2. **BECAUSE OF ITS REPEATED TRUTHS.** Over and over the Bible repeats truth so that “in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established” ([Deut. 17:6-7](#); [19:15](#); [Mt. 18:16](#); [2 Cor. 13:1](#); [1 Tim. 5:19](#); [Heb. 10:28](#)). Any doctrine that is not plainly stated in Scripture is best left alone. If God did not say anything about a particular question, then man has no right to teach anything about it as though it were taught in the Bible. We should limit our teachings to a “thus saith the Lord” or leave the subject alone. Our opinion is of no value when it is used to support or prove something that the Bible clearly does not teach.

If God did say something about a particular subject it will be found in several places, so we will not be left in doubt as to what God says. All we have to do is collect everything God says on a subject, and it will be so clear that no interpretation is necessary. If we do this, nothing will need to be added to or taken from the Bible in order to get the truth. All we need to do is to find out where “it is written” and then believe it. We must always make our ideas conform to the Bible and not the Scripture to our ideas. Anyone who presumes to know more than what God has said usurps God's place as the Author of Scripture.

3. **BECAUSE THE BIBLE IS WRITTEN IN THE SIMPLEST HUMAN LANGUAGE POSSIBLE.** Certainly anyone who understands the simplest human language can understand what it says. Every time any group of persons reads a particular part of the Bible, they read the same thing. If they should read it again, it would still be the same. If they were asked to tell what the passage says, they could all do it without exception. If they can tell what it says and if they can read what it says, then they can all believe what it says, and that is all that is necessary to understand the Bible.

What is hard to understand about something that all can read and believe alike without interpretation?

4. **BECAUSE GOD IS THE AUTHOR OF THE BIBLE** ([2 Tim. 3:15-17](#); [2 Pet. 1:21](#)). If God is the author, we have a right to expect it to be clear. No man can make a book simpler than God can. If God could make a book as simple to understand as man can and did not do so, then we have to conclude that He did not want man to understand His Word. Why then did He give His Word to man? In that case, man should discard the Bible and accuse God of injustice, since He would be judging man on the basis of something that he cannot understand. Since we cannot conceive of God in this light, we are forced to believe that the Bible is simple enough for all to understand.

A God who could not make Himself clear, or who had to be interpreted every time He said something, would be no God at all. Almost any human being can express himself clearly enough to be understood. Furthermore, a God who could make Himself clear and chose to do otherwise, in such a way as to confuse and hide from man those things He seeks to reveal to him, would not be worth hearing. A God that gave man a revelation and deliberately sought to hide it from him, and then judge him for not being able to understand it, would be a tyrant instead of a God of love and justice.

Away with such slanderous concepts of God! How any person who claims any degree of intelligence and love for God can believe these things is beyond our conception. It is the work of the devil to get people to hold slanderous ideas about God and His eternal revelation. The devil wants us to interpret and change God's Word to mean something false so that we will be judged by God in the end for not believing what it says. We had better wake up now to understand the satanic deception before it is too late. Satan knows that God means what He says, and so he wants to deceive men so they will be lost.

Let us believe, like sensible people, that God can and did speak to people in the simplest human language; that He meant exactly what He said and said exactly what He meant; that He expected us to understand it on the same basis, using the same principles of human language that we use to understand other books; that He will hold us responsible for what He says, not for what others interpret His words to say; and that He has a right to judge men in the end if they constantly make Him false in all that He says, and if they listen to satanic theories instead of what God says. Jesus said "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" ([Jn. 12:48](#); [Rev. 20:11-15](#)).

Should this not be enough warning to quit the foolishness of changing God's Word to mean anything we want it to mean? It is the height of ignorance for anyone to claim to be a better interpreter of the Bible than God Himself. We maintain that the Bible needs no interpretation apart from its own explanation of its contents. The Bible interprets its own terms, symbols, parables, allegories, figures of speech, etc. So in these lessons we shall take a different attitude toward the Bible from that usually taken. We shall let God's own Word be the final word of authority on every question. We shall let what God says mean what He says and reject any theory of men to the contrary.

5. **THE BIBLE IS SIMPLE BECAUSE IT WAS GIVEN BY GOD TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY THE SIMPLE.** Following the commonly accepted argument that a perfect God cannot make

anything imperfect, we can scripturally say that God did not fail in His purpose of giving man a simple revelation that could be easily understood by all men alike, even by the simple ([Deut. 29:29](#); [Ps. 119:104, 130](#); [Prov. 1:1-4](#); [2 Tim. 3:15-17](#)). Paul speaks of “the simplicity that is in Christ” ([2 Cor. 11:3](#)). Jesus thanked God that the truths of the Bible were hidden from the worldly wise who refused to believe, and stated that God has “revealed them unto babes” ([Mt. 11:25-27](#)). He tells the reason why truths are hidden from some. It is because they refuse to humble themselves to believe and conform to the Bible ([Mt. 13:10-17](#)). He speaks of the devil taking the Word from the hearts of men lest it should bring forth fruit ([Mt. 13:19-23](#)). Paul speaks of the devil blinding the minds of men lest they should believe, and he also speaks of men willfully handling the Word of God dishonestly and deceitfully ([2 Cor. 4:1-6](#)).

The simplest beginners can understand the Bible one line at a time, for this is the way it was given, and it is the best way to understand it ([Isa. 28:9-13](#)). No man can get all the vastness of the Bible at once. It is the seemingly infinite scope of truth that causes some men to think the Bible is hard to understand. It is like a man arguing that he cannot understand water because he cannot drink the ocean dry at one drink. Naturally, it takes time to get a simple knowledge of the whole Bible, but what we contend is this: it cannot be hard to understand if a person will take it a line at a time, a verse at a time, or one truth at a time. One cannot look at any big book and get all of its contents at a glance. A man is foolish to say the Bible is hard to understand until he gets into it and gets acquainted with its contents. If a man will do this he will find the Bible truths opening up beyond his fondest dreams. *The ones who contend that the Bible is hard to understand are of several classes:*

- (1) Those who are ignorant of its contents.
- (2) Those who are too lazy to master its contents.
- (3) Those who are biased contrary to its contents ([Mt. 15:7-14](#); [Jn. 8:43](#)).
- (4) Those who refuse to believe what it says and get entangled in a maze of hopeless theories and interpretations that they have been taught.
- (5) Those who listen to the old theory that it is hard to understand and who give up in defeat before they try to master its sacred contents.
- (6) Those who have been brought up in the wrong school of thought concerning the Bible and wonder if God means what He says ([Mt. 16:6-12](#); [Lk. 24:25](#); [Mk. 16:14](#)).
- (7) Those who are too worldly wise and think they know more than the Bible and who, through their unbelief and pride, discount its contents.
- (8) Those who are unstable and unlearned and wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction ([2 Pet. 3:16](#)).
- (9) Those who willfully handle the Word of God deceitfully to cover up their own sins which the Bible condemns ([2 Cor. 4:1-4](#)).
- (10) Those who permit Satan to take the Word from their lives, causing them to be blind concerning the truth ([Mt. 13:19-23](#); [2 Cor. 4:1-4](#)).

(11) Those who make merchandise of fighting the Word of God ([Mt. 15:7-14](#); [2 Pet. 2:1-3](#)).

(12) Those who refuse to be converted and become as little children ([Mt. 18:3](#); [28:9-15](#); [Isa. 6:9-10](#); [Acts 28:24-29](#)).

6. THE BIBLE IS SIMPLE BECAUSE READING AND BELIEVING WITH A SIMPLE HEART IS ALL GOD CONSIDERS NECESSARY TO UNDERSTAND IT. God commands all men to be saved and to understand His Word ([Ps. 32:9](#); [Prov. 4:5](#); [8:4-10](#)). Men are not to add to or take from the Bible in any detail; that is, they must take it as it is written ([Deut. 4:2-6](#); [12:32](#); [Rev. 22:18-19](#)). Men are to search and study the Bible and apply their hearts to it, so they must be able to understand it ([Jn. 5:39](#); [Ps. 1:2-3](#); [90:12](#); [2 Tim. 2:15](#); [3:15-17](#)). God created men with a spirit to understand His Word. God made both man and His Word, and they fit together as a lock and key ([Job 32:8](#); [38:3-6](#); [Jn. 1:4-9](#)). Even the ungodly can understand, if they so desire ([Rom. 1:16-20](#)). So the old theory that men must be saved and be spiritual in order to understand the Bible is unscriptural. All the references above apply to all men alike—saved and unsaved. All men can understand the letter of the Bible alike, and if they want the experiences taught in the Bible they can understand them by the letter sufficiently to attain to those experiences. Because some do not live up to the light they receive, God will have a just basis to judge them in the end.

Some argue from [1 Cor. 2:14](#) that the Bible is hard to understand, but this passage does not say this. It says that the “natural man” cannot receive the things of the Spirit, but it does not teach that sinners cannot understand the letter of the Word. Some use [2 Pet. 3:16-18](#) to teach that sinners cannot understand the Bible, but this passage does not say that. It does say that the “unstable and unlearned” wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction. If sinners could not understand the Bible, how could they get saved or know what God requires of them? How could God judge them if they cannot understand the things for which they will be judged? The fact is that many sinners understand the Bible better than saints, because they are more sensible than saints and will take the Bible to mean what it says. If all saints would do this they would have a distinct advantage over the sinner in that they have the Spirit of God in their lives to illuminate them, while sinners do not ([Jn. 14:17](#); [Rom. 8:9](#)).

7. THE BIBLE IS A SIMPLE BOOK TO UNDERSTAND BECAUSE MOST OF IT IS HISTORY AND SIMPLE INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT HOW TO LIVE. About 25,007 verses of the Bible—around 80 percent of it—contain simple history, commands, warnings, promises, rebukes, and plain instructions by which men may understand the will of God and a record of the past. What could there be in any one of these verses that natural man could not understand? Anyone with common intelligence ought to understand the language of these verses. The other 6,207 of the 31,214 verses of the Bible are prophecy written in the same simple human language that is used to record history. Of these 6,207 verses, 3,299 have been fulfilled and are now history. The other 2,908 are unfulfilled prophecy and are just as easy to understand as history, for prophecy is simply history written beforehand. If one can understand what has happened by a clear record of it, he should also be able to understand what is yet to happen by the same clear record. What then is hard to understand about either history or prophecy? What is hard to understand about any part of the Bible? We conclude that the Bible is a very simple book to comprehend if we will believe it as it is written and let it be our rule of faith and practice.

## II. Definition of Terms

1. INTERPRET. This word as we use it means to state the true sense of God's message as He expresses it; that is, give to the reader the exact statements of Scripture without change to prove every question discussed; to state exactly what God says and where He says it. We consider this all sufficient. The modern way of interpreting the Bible is to change the meaning of what is written to suit one's fancy and to harmonize the Bible with one's own theories. This we call "How not to interpret the Bible," because it transgresses every known sensible principle of true interpretation and places man as the authority above God concerning the Bible.

The Bible is clear in itself when all traditions, wrong interpretations, manifold changes, and spiritualizing of Scripture are abandoned. The average person is blind to many simple truths of Scripture because they have been overlaid with so many human traditions and interpretations designed to serve a church, a party, or some personal fancy. The purpose of this lesson is to show the fallacy of such overlay of Scripture and to call attention to what God does say, which is always clear in itself.

2. HERMENEUTICS is the science or art of interpretation and explanation. It comes from the Greek *ermeneuo*, meaning "to explain," "to expound," and "to interpret" ([Jn. 1:38-42](#); [9:7](#); [Heb. 7:2](#)). It is the science that establishes and classifies the principles, methods and rules by which the meaning of the author's language is ascertained. The interpretation of any piece of literature will depend upon the nature of the work under consideration. Poetry, history, fiction, and each form of human expression require a different set of rules. The rules of writing when interpreting a work of fiction would not be suitable for history. Accordingly, the rules that govern Bible interpretation depend upon the character of its separate kinds of writings, just as is true of different kinds of writings in other books.

Since the Bible is like other books in that it is written in human language, it must be interpreted like all other literature. If heavenly, supernatural, and spiritual truths are written in human language, we must understand such truths on this basis. One must understand the words and expressions in the Bible the same as if they were found outside of it. There can be no special Bible logic, rhetoric, or grammar. The laws of grammar apply to the Bible as they do to other writings.

Christ and His disciples prove this method of interpretation. In about 400 quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament, the phrase "It is written" is held as all that is necessary to prove the sense of God's message. This will settle every point of doctrine today if we are to be Christ-like. *Not one example* is found in Scripture where the plain literal sense of Scripture was done away with by the allegorical, mystical, speculative, spiritualizing, and symbolizing methods so prominent today. We must lay aside all such methods if a true knowledge of the Bible is to be gained.

3. BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS is the science that establishes and classifies the principles, methods, and rules by which the Word of God is made plain.

4. EXEGESIS is the application of the rules of biblical hermeneutics to the unfolding of the meaning of a passage of Scripture. Interpretation expresses exactly the mind and thoughts of another and is purely a reproductive process, involving no originality of thought on the part of the interpreter. Exegesis is the use of the science of interpretation in the reproduction of the thoughts of God as expressed in Scripture. To be a faithful *exegete* is a great responsibility and will be greatly

rewarded, but to be an *eisegete* (one who is faulty in the explanation of Scripture) may mean the loss of the soul of the interpreter as well as of those who follow him.

### III. Reasons for Biblical Hermeneutics

1. The Bible is a heavenly message conveyed in human language, and the same principles of interpretation used with all human language must also apply to the Bible.
2. The languages of the Bible differ in some respects from the English in grammatical structure and idiomatic usage. These differences must be known in order to understand certain passages.
3. The Bible is a composite book of 66 books.
4. The Bible is a religious book for this life and the life to come.
5. The Bible is a varied book; an oriental library. It contains all forms of human expression and all kinds of literature.
6. The Bible is a product of many lands and peoples with habits and customs that are different from ours.
7. The mutability of the English language and its unfaithfulness in literally translating every phase of thought of the Hebrew and Greek makes it necessary to observe certain rules in order to arrive at the meaning of a certain passage.

### IV. Two Seemingly Contradictory Ways to Read the Bible

1. It is to be read like any other book from the beginning to the end, getting the thought of each writer, the meaning of the words and peculiar expressions he used, the manners and customs of Bible lands and times, the purpose God had in mind in each particular message, and the particular people to whom he wrote.
2. It is to be read differently from any other book because it is an inspired book. Much of it is a revelation from God ([2 Tim. 3:15-17](#)). It should be read slowly, prayerfully, frequently, reverently, meditatively, searchingly, perseveringly, believingly, and obediently.

### V. Historical Sketch of Hermeneutics

A brief knowledge of the history of biblical interpretation is of great value to the Bible student. It helps to guard against making the same errors others have made. It shows what influences caused men to make these errors. The science of interpretation has passed through many false concepts just like the other sciences, but thank God, as in the other sciences, we are beginning to demand reasons for certain interpretations.

The efforts of men in the past have demonstrated the utter foolishness of doing away with the plain literal sense of Scripture. The belief that the Bible was a divine book almost completely closed the eyes of ancient interpreters to its human elements, its literary and grammatical construction, its history, and its literal, original and intended meaning. Both Jews and Christians have sought hidden

meanings in the most minute jot and tittle of the sacred text. They did not consider what the original purpose of God was. Just like the average person today, their main burden seems to be to prove their own speculations and human theories, regardless of how they contradict the Bible. With such abuse of the Bible, it came to be looked upon as a mysterious book beyond the understanding of the common people. Among the Jews it was believed that nobody but the rabbis could understand it, and among the Christians it was thought that only a few select heads of the Church could unravel its mysteries. Millions today are taught that the common man cannot understand the Bible and that it should be left to the priests and preachers to interpret it. This is one of the greatest fallacies of Christendom.

1. THE JEWISH METHOD OF INTERPRETATION. Jewish exegesis from Ezra to Christ may be traced in the Apocrypha, the works of Philo, Josephus, and the Talmud. Interpreters of this period set a value on each letter and held each one to be the source of great mysteries. To every letter they attached a numerical value and imposed fantastic meanings on plain historical statements. For example, the letters in the name Eliezer have a numerical value in Hebrew of 318. In [Gen. 14:14](#) we read that Abraham had 318 trained servants. This was made to indicate that Eliezer was equal in value to all these servants. The word *Keturah* in Hebrew means “sweet odor.” We are told that Abraham married Keturah. This was interpreted to mean that he wed a holy life. In [Gen. 25](#) we are told that Abraham had six sons by Keturah; so if we believed the Jewish method of interpretation, we could not believe the literal, which states that Abraham married a woman and had these sons by her.

The Scribes carefully guarded against errors and interpolations in the text, but they set up an oral law or tradition, which in time came to be looked upon by the Jews as equal in authority to the Scriptures. Christ swept away all these traditions and interpretations and accepted the plain literal written Word of God as the only truth ([Mk. 7:1-13](#)). Paul also rebuked the Jews for taking their traditions before they would the Word of God ([Gal. 1:13-14](#); [Col. 2:8](#); [1 Tim. 1:4](#); [6:20](#); [2 Tim. 2:14-16](#); [Titus 1:14](#); [3:9](#)).

2. THE ALLEGORICAL METHOD OF INTERPRETATION. The early Church Fathers, instead of following the plain literal meaning of Scripture as did Christ and the apostles, followed more or less the Jewish method of interpretation. The literal sense of Scripture was overlaid with the allegorical, moral and spiritual interpretations. Origin gave a threefold meaning to all Scripture corresponding to the body (literal), the soul (moral), and the spirit (spiritual or mystical). He greatly influenced others in the Church for many centuries. Clement interpreted the scarlet cord out of Rahab's window as meaning the blood of Christ. Chrysostom believed the six steps of Solomon's throne to mean six steps leading to God. And so it was with nearly everything in Scripture. The literal and historical meaning was almost completely done away with and the spiritual and mystical meaning took the place of the literal.

This method of interpretation continued to the Reformation. Since then the Scriptures have been more or less freed from the early traditions of men who began to study the Bible in a more literal sense. In spite of this new freedom of Scripture from much of the former spiritualizing tendencies and magical meanings, there are many ministers today who have gone back to the unintelligent methods of the past. We should reject and utterly avoid all such foolishness. The habit of these men is to disregard the common significance of words, the grammatical construction, and the literal

intention of God in Scripture. They force into Scripture any meaning their fancy chooses, and they make the interpreter equal to God and his interpretations even better than the plain Word of God.

3. THE RATIONALISTIC METHOD OF INTERPRETATION. There are several methods of modern interpretation that are rationalistic in spirit; that is, they substitute reason for faith and human speculation for divine revelation. They explain away the supernatural element in Scripture, all miracles, eternal judgment, atonement, resurrection, and all the essentials of the Bible. These methods leave man free to choose his own meaning of Scripture, which is never the meaning written. As methods of interpretation, these are all lawless and irrational and there is no agreement among the adherents of them. By these methods, sin, Satan, sickness, and the realities of life here and hereafter are explained away as errors of the mortal mind and as unreal things. Thus, the Word of God is nullified by the theories of men.

## VI. Summary of the False Methods of Interpretation

1. An undue reverence for the Scriptures manifesting itself in an effort to find hidden meanings for every letter and every word. This amounts to idolatry of the letter and leads us away from the real meaning of Scripture. This is the reason so many men today can find more written between the lines than in the lines of Scripture itself. They can find out more about many subjects of the Bible than God Himself has revealed. They can seemingly prove many doctrines that are not one time mentioned in Scripture, but they never seem to be able to prove those that are found many times in the Bible.

2. A positive hostility to the text resulting in a vain attempt to eliminate the supernatural element and the means of redemption through Jesus Christ. This amounts to utter destruction of the Word of God as far as actual and real benefits to the individual in this life and the life to come are concerned.

## VII. The True Method of Bible Interpretation

The chief fundamental principle is to gather from the Scriptures themselves the precise meaning the writers intended to convey. It applies to the Bible the same principles, rules, grammatical process, and exercise of common sense and reason that we apply to other books. In doing this, one must take the Bible *as literal whenever possible*. When a statement is found that cannot possibly be literal, as Jesus being a “door” or of a woman being clothed with the sun and standing on the moon and on her head a crown of twelve stars, or of land animals coming out of the sea, and other statements which are obviously not literal, then we know the language is figurative. In such cases we must get the literal truth conveyed by the figurative language, and the truth intended to be conveyed will be as literal as if it were expressed in literal language without the use of such figures. *After all, figurative language expresses literal truth as much as if such figures were not used. In a general sense, the true method of Bible interpretation embraces the following ideas:*

1. The primary meaning of words and their common use in a particular age in which they are used, and the importance of synonyms.
2. The grammatical construction and idiomatic peculiarities of the languages of the Bible, and the meaning of the context, both immediate and remote.

3. Comparison of parallel passages on the same subject.
4. The purpose or object of each writer in each particular book.
5. The historical background of each writer and the circumstances under which he wrote.
6. The general plan of the entire Bible, and its moral and spiritual teachings.
7. The agreement of Scripture in its several parts, and its prophecies and their fulfillment.
8. The manners and customs of the particular age and land of each writer.
9. Understanding of how to interpret prophecy, poetry, allegories, symbols, parables, figures of speech, types and all other forms of human expression.
10. The different classes of people and institutions dealt with in Scripture, and the application of the different principles and rules of interpretation below.

When the student keeps all these facts in mind, and the Scripture is interpreted in harmony with these principles, there cannot possibly be any misunderstanding of the Bible. *Remember this: Take the Bible literally whenever it is at all possible. When the language cannot be taken literally, then we know it is figurative. Then get the literal truth conveyed by the figurative language as if it were expressed in literal language without the use of figures.*

## VIII. General Rules of Biblical Interpretation

1. The entire Bible came from God and possesses unity of design and teaching. We shall, therefore, consider both Testaments together as being equally inspired.
2. It may be assumed that no one resorts to speech or writing without having some idea to express; that in order to express that idea he will use words and forms of speech familiar to his hearers or readers; and that if he uses a word or figure of speech in a different sense from what is commonly understood he will make the fact known.
3. The Bible cannot contradict itself. Its teachings in one part must agree with its teachings in another part. Therefore, any interpretation which makes the Bible inconsistent with itself must rest upon false principles.
4. Passages on Christian experience cannot be understood beyond the letter of the word until we enter into the experimental aspect of them. Christian experience should be founded upon the Bible, not Scriptures upon experience.
5. No meaning should be gotten from the Bible except that which a fair and honest, grammatical, and historical interpretation yields.
6. Language is an accumulation of words used to interchange thoughts. To understand the language of the speaker or writer, it is necessary to know the meaning of his words. A true meaning of the words is a true meaning of the sense. It is as true of the Bible as of any other book.
7. Often to fully understand a passage of Scripture, the scope or plan of the entire book must be known. Sometimes the design of the books are made clear, as in the case of [Proverbs 1:1-4](#);

[Isaiah 1:1-3](#); John ([20:31](#)); [Revelation 1:1](#); etc. If the definite purpose of the book is not stated, the purpose of the book must be gotten from the contents and from the design of the Bible as a whole, as is clear in [Jn. 5:39](#); [2 Tim. 2:15](#); [3:16-17](#). Some seeming contradictions are cleared up when this rule is observed. The difference between Paul and James is easily understood when the design of their books is understood and recognized. In Romans, Paul seeks to prove that a man is *not saved by works*, while in James he seeks to show that a man *cannot remain saved* unless he brings forth good works.

8. Sometimes the connection is obscured through the use of virtual dialogue between the writers and unseen persons, as in [Ps. 15](#); [Isa. 52:13](#); [63:1-6](#); [Rom. 3](#); etc.

9. One of the most fundamental rules of interpretation is that of comparing Scripture with Scripture. It is by a strict and honest observance of this rule that the true meaning can be gotten when every other thing has failed to make the meaning clear. Before arriving at the whole truth, be sure that all the Scriptures on a subject are collected together and read at one time. If there is any question left after you have done this, then go over the whole subject carefully until every question is cleared up. One great fault with many people is the acceptance of only part of the Scriptures on a subject and the rejection of other passages that contradict their theory. This is not being honest with the Bible, and it leads to darkness instead of light.

10. Not only should all passages be compared until there is perfect harmony, but also comparison of the words of the different writers should be compared and harmonized. Words often change their meaning from one age to another. The Bible was written in different lands and some of it about 1,800 years apart, so a comparison of words used by the writers is very necessary to see if the same words mean the same in one age as in another. This can always be determined by the subject matter.

11. In some places a statement on a subject may be very brief and seemingly obscure and will be made perfectly clear by a larger passage on the same subject. Always explain the seemingly difficult with the more simple Scriptures. No doctrine founded upon a single verse of Scripture contains the whole of the subject, so do not be dishonest and wrest with Scripture or force a meaning into a passage that is not clearly understood in the passage or in parallel passages on the same subject. Be honest, open minded, studious and zealous to arrive at the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Find out whether the language is literal or figurative, whether the right meaning of the words and terms used is understood and whether or not they have only one meaning. Be sure to choose the meaning that will best harmonize with the subject in the passage itself and with all other passages on the same subject.

12. The progressive character of revelation and the gradual development of truth should be recognized. Some truths found in germ in the Old Testament are fully developed in the New Testament. For example, the idea of blood sacrifices was developed from the time of Abel until it was fully culminated and made eternally clear in the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.

13. The meaning of a word or phrase in the New Testament must not be carried back into Old Testament doctrine unless such is warranted by both Testaments. For example, water baptism, the Lord's Supper, and other New Testament doctrines are not found in the Old Testament at all. It is not proper to ask whether David was baptized in water, or whether Saul was a Christian, because these are New Testament terms.

14. Passages obviously literal should not be spiritualized. For example, making the natural blessings of Canaan the spiritual blessings of Heaven, or regarding the ark of Noah as salvation through Christ, and hundreds of like interpretations. One may get lessons and illustrations from historical passages and make applications in sermons, but in the interpretation they are to be taken literally and should not be spiritualized. Such lessons from the Old Testament historical events form the basis of proof of many church doctrines in some circles. Some men cannot talk about Christ and His bride without referring to Adam and Eve, Isaac and Rebekah, etc. If a person wants to prove a church doctrine he needs to get plain passages on the subject, and not base the proof on historical events which literally happened and which were never recorded to teach such doctrines. Always get two or three plain Scriptures to prove a doctrine, or forget it.

15. The dispensational character of Scripture should be noted so that one can pigeonhole every passage of Scripture in some definite period in God's plan.

16. The three classes of people (the Jews, the Church, and the Gentiles) dealt with in Scripture should be noted. Up to [Gen. 12](#), the race as a whole is dealt with. From [Gen. 12](#) to the New Testament the Jews and the Gentiles are dealt with; and in the New Testament these and the Church of God, made up of Jews and Gentiles, are dealt with ([1 Cor. 10:32](#)).

17. In all study of doctrine the practical aspect must be kept in view ([2 Tim. 3:16-17](#)).

18. The comparative importance of truth should be emphasized. The positive truths should be studied more than the negative. It is more important to have faith instead of unbelief, to know God better than Satan, etc. So one should learn more about faith and God than unbelief and Satan.

19. General familiarity with the Bible as a whole is very important. Keep reading the Bible over and over until its contents as a whole become familiar. The more one can remember about what he has read, the clearer the Bible will become.

20. A few “must's” and “must not's” should be kept in mind in our study of Scripture. *We must not* handle the Word of God deceitfully ([2 Cor. 4:1-4](#)). *We must not* insist that the Bible is hard to understand. *We must not* misapply Scripture to a subject or an age to which it does not belong. *We must not* misinterpret Scripture. *We must* let the Bible be its own interpreter and be satisfied to accept its own authority as to the meaning of any subject.

In our Lord's time on Earth, to receive the mass of Jewish reasonings, traditions, and interpretations superimposed upon Scripture was to be orthodox, but to return to the authority of the Scriptures themselves was to be heterodox (at variance with commonly accepted doctrine in religion)—our Lord's most serious offense to the Jews ([Mt. 15:1-9](#); [16:6-12](#); [23:1-36](#); [Mk. 3:1-6](#); [7:1-13](#); [Jn. 5-8](#)). Today the decisions of church councils, decrees of church leaders, and fanciful and spiritual interpretations of many ministers have almost nullified the Word of God and the literal sense of Scripture. Some sects are getting into the habit of doing away with Scriptures that are contrary to their theories by saying, “that is a parable,” or “that is figurative language,” as if such language means nothing.

21. Words of Scripture must agree with the content and the subject matter in the passages where found. No meaning should be given to a word that would be in the least out of harmony with any Scripture. For example, the word “seen” in [Jn. 1:18](#) should be understood to mean “comprehended” in order to harmonize with all Scriptures stating that men saw God with their natural eyes.

22. Careful attention should be paid to connecting words that connect events with each other, as the words “when,” “then,” etc., in [Mt. 24:15-16](#), [21](#), [23](#), [40](#); [25:1](#).

23. Careful attention should be paid to prepositions, definite articles, names of different persons and places with the same name, same persons and places with different names, and the names of different persons and places that are spelled differently by different authors in different books.

24. Ascertain the exact meaning of the words of Scripture. The way a word is used, the subject matter, and the context often determine the true meaning.

25. Hebrew and Greek idioms should be noted. Sometimes a person having a peculiar characteristic, or subject to a peculiar evil, or destined to a particular destiny is called the child of that evil or destiny ([Lk. 10:6](#); [Eph. 2:1-3](#); [2 Thess. 2:3](#)). The word “father” is applied to the originator of any custom or to the inventor of something ([Gen. 4:20-21](#); [Jn. 8:44](#)). It is also used for *ancestor* ([1 Chron. 1:17](#)). The words “son” and “daughter” are sometimes used of *descendants* or *in-laws*. ([Gen. 46:22](#); [Lk. 3:23](#)). The words “brother” and “cousin” are sometimes used of *relatives* and *countrymen* ([Gen. 14:16](#) with [11:31](#); [Lk. 1:36](#), [58](#)). Names of parents are used of *posterity* ([1 Ki. 18:17-18](#)).

26. Preference is sometimes expressed by the word “hate” ([Lk. 14:26](#); [Rom. 9:13](#)).

27. A peculiar idiom concerning numbers must be understood. Sometimes round numbers rather than the exact number are used ([Judg. 20:35](#), [46](#)). This will explain seeming contradictions between numbers. Failure to understand this idiom may have caused copyists and translators to misunderstand the numbers of some passages which seem erroneous and very large. For example, in [1 Sam. 6:19](#), we read the Lord smote in a very small town 50,070 people, which, in the Hebrew text reads, “seventy men two fifties and one thousand” or 70—100—1,000, or 1,170 people.

28. Careful attention should be paid to parenthesis, the use of italics (meaning these words are not in the original but supplied in English to make sense), the use of capital letters, marginal notes, references, summaries of chapters, chapter and page headings, the division of the text into chapters and verses, punctuation, obsolete English words, the rendering of the same original words by different English words, and other things about the English translations. All these things are human additions to the original text and should not be relied upon. For example, the running of references to prove a doctrine is sometimes misleading. The references may not be on the same subject, as can be easily detected by the reader.

29. Seeming contradictions in Scripture should be considered in the light of all the principles stated above. It must be kept in mind that the Bible records sayings of men under pressure of trials who said things that they never would have said otherwise. It records sayings of backsliders and rebels against God. It records statements of Satan and demons, and the words of such rebels should never be taken as words from the mouth of God. They should not always be held as truth, for sometimes they are lies. Inspiration guarantees that these rebels said those things, but it does not guarantee that what they said is truth. Sometimes such statements contradict those of God and good men under divine utterance. Enemies of God take such contradictions between what God says and what rebels against God say and use them to prove the Bible contradicts itself. Naturally, such contradictions are found in the Bible, but they are not contradictions between statements made by

God. The only statements that can be relied upon as truth are those that come from God and men who speak for God as the Spirit gives utterance, and in these there is no contradiction.

The Bible also records the changes of God's will and plan in a later age over that of an earlier one. Such changes have been taken by the ungodly as contradictions, but these changes had to be made by God because of the sin and rebellion of the people to whom He promised such things and for whom He made a certain plan. For example, in [Gen. 1:31](#) God saw everything He had made and it was good, but in [Gen. 6:6](#) God repented that He had made man. In the meantime, between the two passages, sin and rebellion entered, which made it necessary for God to change His attitude toward man. God has had to alter His plan temporarily because of man's sin, but the original and eternal plan of God for creation has never been changed and never will be. God will finally realize His original purpose; that is the reason for His present dispensational dealings, as we have seen in Lesson One, Point VIII. God deals with each generation as circumstances demand. Sometimes God has had to change His promises to a certain group because they refused to meet the conditions for the fulfillment of these promises.

30. The seeming contradictions in the New Testament will also vanish and be cleared up if men would be as fair with God as they want God to be with them in the judgment. Always look for an explanation and it will be found. For example, men criticize the Bible for lack of harmony between the temptations of Christ in [Mt. 4](#) and those in [Lk. 4](#), but when we consider that there were two separate sets of temptations during the forty days, there is no contradiction. After the first set of tests in Luke, Satan was dismissed "for a season," and after the last set of tests in Matthew, Satan was dismissed for good. The seeming contradictions between the sermons of [Mt. 5](#) and [Lk. 6](#) are cleared up when we see that there were two sermons—one *on the mount* and the other *in the plain*. The so-called contradictions of the Bible are unreal and imaginary. Because of the lack of information as to the time, places and circumstances, men cannot always judge concerning them, so it would be best always to give God the benefit of the doubt, since He knows all things and was there when they happened. If He did not see fit to give every detail so as to make all things fully clear, that is His wisdom. It should not detract from faith in God and His revelation.

All seeming contradictions in the Bible are easily cleared up with a better knowledge of the text, by correct translation, by knowing the manners and customs of the age and the country in which the books were written, by a wider application of historical facts, and by a fair, sane application of the rules of interpretation given above.

## IX. Figurative Language of the Bible

The Bible contains some figurative language. Much confusion has been caused by taking as literal what is figurative, and taking as figurative what is literal. A figure of speech consists in the use of words in a different sense from that which is ordinarily given them. *They are used to give emphasis and to add attraction and variety to human expression. They are never used for the purpose of doing away with literal truth, but of setting forth literal truth in another form than that which could be literally expressed.* The literal truth in all figurative language is the thing to get and one should not permit figures of speech to do away with the intended truth. If we fail to get the literal truth conveyed, the figure of speech has failed in its purpose.

When God resorted to human language to express His revelation He used all forms of human expression just as men use them. He expressed the unknown in terms of that which is known. Things about Himself and the invisible world He made clear by the things of the visible world ([Rom. 1:19-20](#)). We must understand His revelation in this light. No meaning should be given to any Scripture beyond that which a natural and literal interpretation yields. Ideas can be enlarged from the finite to the infinite, but no change is necessary in the idea while making such enlargement.

But how can we tell whether the language is literal or figurative? This is one of the simplest questions to answer. Any man with ordinary intelligence can distinguish between the two ways of expressing truth. The one fundamental rule to determine whether the language is literal or figurative is this: *take every statement in the Bible as literal when it is at all possible and where it is clear that it is literal; otherwise, it is figurative.* In other words, what cannot be literal must be figurative. The subject matter itself as expressed in human language will always make this clear.

One must be sure the language is figurative before giving it a figurative meaning. If it seems hard to determine by the words of the subject matter, then Scriptures on the same subject will clear up the difficulty. There are always plain literal statements in the Bible proving every doctrine. So if a figurative statement is found in the Bible on the same subject, explain the figurative passage with the literal passages. *Remember, no figure of speech ever does away with the literal truth, but merely expresses it in another way.* Surely with such an abundance of literal passages, the few figurative statements on the same subject in Scripture can be understood.

Figures of speech are of two main kinds: first, those involving only a *word*, as in [Gal. 2:9](#) where Peter, James, and John are called “pillars” of the Church; second, those involving a *thought* expressed in several words or sentences, as the parable, allegory, symbol, type, riddle, fable, enigma, etc.

People who have any knowledge of these forms of human expression should understand them in the Bible just as they do in other books because God used all these different forms of expression in giving His revelation. He used them for the same purpose as men do—to convey literal truths. All men can understand the Bible alike on the same grounds in which they understand other books where these forms of human language are used, if they will be as sensible about the Bible as they are with other books. Men do not spiritualize other books, or make every literal statement in them to be symbolic and mystical, and there is no excuse for them to do this with the Bible.

When such human language is used in other books, men do not differ so much. They do not make them mean anything that they want them to mean. They are sensible with the writings of others and put forth every effort to get the intended idea of the author, but when it comes to the Bible the intent of God as plainly stated means nothing to the average person. Just so each person can change and interpret to suit himself, he thinks that his interpretation must be the truth of the Bible.

This method of interpretation is nothing less than the satanic opposition against God which tries to turn men away from the thoughts God wants them to get in order for them to be blessed. If Satan can succeed in his purpose, God and His Word will be discredited, and men will pay little heed to what is written. The Bible should mean the same to all men, and it would if all men would be sensible and interpret it in the plain, literal sense as they do other books. Men will not be held

guiltless for this attitude, so while there is yet time let us all grasp a sane view of the Bible and understand it just as it is written.

With a knowledge of the general plan of God, what the Scriptures are, and how to interpret them, we shall now begin a study of the Bible and its eternal plan for man.

### QUESTIONS ON LESSON 3

1. What false ideas are universally held concerning the Bible?
2. State several reasons why the Bible is simple to understand.
3. How many Scriptures are required to prove a doctrine?
4. Should the Bible teacher ever teach something as biblical that is not plainly stated in the Bible?
5. What is the one necessary thing to do in order to understand the Bible?
6. Do we have a right to expect God to give His revelation clearly enough so that all men can understand it alike?
7. Would God be a just person to seek to hide from man His revelation and then judge him for not being able to understand it?
8. What is to be the basis of man's judgment?
9. What was the purpose of God in giving His revelation?
10. Prove from the Bible that the simplest people can understand it.
11. Why is the Bible hard for some to understand?
12. What is the sensible way to go about understanding the Bible?
13. Name a few classes of people who say the Bible is hard to understand.
14. What does God consider necessary to understand the Bible?
15. Can unsaved men understand the Bible? Why?
16. What is it that the natural man cannot receive?
17. How could God judge men if they cannot understand His message?
18. About how much of the Bible is history and simple instruction?
19. How much of the Bible is prophecy?
20. Can prophecy be understood as easily as history? Why?
21. Define "interpret" as we use it. Define the modern idea of "interpret."
22. Define "hermeneutics," "biblical hermeneutics" and "exegesis."

23. Give a few reasons for biblical hermeneutics.
24. In what two seemingly contradictory ways should the Bible be read?
25. Why should we study the history of interpretation?
26. What was the Jewish method of interpretation?
27. What was the allegorical method of interpretation?
28. What is the rationalistic method of interpretation?
29. Give the twofold summary of the false methods of interpretation.
30. What is the true method of Bible interpretation?
31. What does this method of interpretation embrace?
32. State and discuss at least half of the first eight rules of interpretation.
33. What is one of the most fundamental rules of interpretation?
34. State a few rules on how to understand a seemingly difficult passage.
35. State several other principles of interpretation.
36. Should literal passages be spiritualized? Why?
37. How does a knowledge of God's plan aid in understanding the Bible?
38. What three classes of people are dealt with in Scripture?
39. What truths should be emphasized more than others?
40. How does a general knowledge of the Bible help in interpretation?
41. Name a few "musts" in Scripture interpretation.
42. What was our Lord's most serious offense?
43. State a few facts concerning "words" in Bible interpretation.
44. State a few facts concerning "idioms" in Bible interpretation.
45. State a few facts of interpretation concerning English translations.
46. How are seeming contradictions of Scripture made clear?
47. Does the Bible record only the Word of God?
48. Has God ever had to change His plan temporarily? Why?
49. What kinds of figurative language do we find in Scripture?
50. Why did God use figures of speech?

51. Do figures of speech do away with literal truth?
52. Is figurative language as true as literal language?
53. How can we tell the difference between figurative and literal language?
54. On what basis should all men understand the Bible alike?
55. Why do men misunderstand the Bible language when they understand the same language in the right way when anyone else uses it?

God's Plan for Man.