

Session 7 - Tackling Tough Passages

It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.
– Mark Twain

Welcome to the final session of "Reading the Bible 101." Congratulations for making it this far with your group and hopefully in your daily readings as well. We encourage you to leave time at the end of this study to share what you appreciate about what the other people in your group have added to this experience.

1. How are the daily Bible readings going for your and/or your family?

2. Is there a particular passage or teaching from the Bible that has always been difficult for you?

As we read more and more of the Bible, we will certainly come across head-scratching passages. Sometimes the passages or issues that the Bible raises cause a significant struggle or even a crisis of faith. Paradoxically, the more we trust in Scripture as God's infallible word, the greater the internal conflict when we come across a passage that we cannot reconcile. Here are three categories of tough passages:

- **Gut Checks:** straightforward to understand but incredibly challenging to live out
- **Bible 180's:** they appear to contradict another part of Scripture
- **Hot Potatoes:** unpopular stances on controversial issues in our culture

3. *We'll look at each one of these in turn, but are there additional reasons why you may find certain passages or teachings difficult?*

Before we jump into the tough passages, a couple of reflections. First, in approaching tough questions or issues, we tend to focus on purely logical or intellectual ways of "solving" or "figuring out" the problems, and there is a crucial role of studying the Scriptures. But remember, we are cultivating a relationship with God, and so lean on Him as you struggle. Ask for guidance and insight from the Holy Spirit, write down your questions in a journal as a form of prayer, and trust that God is in control even though not all your questions are answered.

Second, the purpose of this study is to equip God's people with the tools and ability to read the Bible for themselves, to become "self-feeding" Christians. That means that we are not necessarily trying to provide the "right" answer in this section, but to give you tools and perspective to discover God's answers in Scripture. With that in mind, let's consider some challenging passages.

Gut Checks

"Gut check" passages may be clear as day to understand but feel difficult or even impossible to obey. For instance, Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28, *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."* Jesus is saying that adultery is not simply the act of sleeping with someone who is not your spouse. It is also the lust in our heart that He sees (even though no one else does) and that even that lustful look is sin. Under this criteria, every man on the planet is an adulterer! And so we find this passage difficult because it condemns us as sinners. Similarly, Matthew 19:23-24 says,

Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly I tell you, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.'

To the disciples' way of thinking, being rich was a sign of blessing from God, and here Jesus turns it upside down by saying it's impossible for rich people to be saved. In fact, right after Jesus' words about the rich, here is how the disciples responded in Matthew 19:25-26:

When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With human beings this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Many believe that the incredibly high bar that Jesus sets for our moral and ethical behavior is His intentional strategy to drive us to our knees with the recognition that we can't please God on our own. Thus, we are forced to throw ourselves upon the mercy of God and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to live as Christ calls us to live. So, rather than try to lessen the severity of the teaching or explain it away, we instead seek God's strength to obey.

4. *Do you find that "gut check" passages draw you into greater dependence on God? Or do they leave you more frustrated?*

Bible 180's

Some times we will come to one part of the Bible that seems to be 180 degrees different from another part of Scripture. In that case, do Jesus' teachings win out over Paul's? How do we arbitrate these situations?

5. *Read Galatians 6:1-6. Does Paul contradict himself with he writes "carry each other's burdens" in verse 2, and then a few verses later, write "carry your own load" in verse 5?*

Where did you arrive in your discussion of Galatians 6? Some may have noted the difference between "burdens" (the Greek word used refers to a heavy burden) and "load" (which refers to a man's pack), or the fact that Paul

is balancing our corporate responsibility to one another in the body of Christ with the need for individuals to take personal responsibility. The point is, passages like this can often be resolved through more thorough word studies or studying the context.

Other times the apparent contradictions may be doctrinal or theological in nature, such as the nature of God's sovereignty versus man's free will. Interestingly, the Bible itself does not seem to struggle with these issues. The biblical writers are not unaware of the tension, but they seem to be able to hold these paradoxes together. In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul seems to refer to our part in salvation and yet gives God the credit for the work: "*...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.*"

Or consider the difference between Paul's emphasis on salvation by faith and James' emphasis on our faith being demonstrated by our works. And yet this is largely a false dichotomy because Paul clearly emphasizes the importance of good works in the second half of nearly every one of his letters. Here are some strategies when looking at two passages that appear to contradict each other:

- *Define terms.* Is one passage or author using the same or similar word in a different way than the other passage or author? Here's where a concordance can be helpful to see how the author(s) have used the same word elsewhere.
- *Look at the larger context or setting of the book.* Is there a reason the author is emphasizing a particular point to his audience?
- *Notice a possible difference in covenants.* Previously in Session 2 we looked at how the Old Testament is read in light of the New. So most of the ritual and ceremonial laws are no longer binding, while the moral and ethical aspects of the Old Testament are reaffirmed in the New Testament and reflect God's timeless truths.

Hot Potatoes

Hot potatoes are hard to hold! They are issues that generate lots of heat but little light. They typically have to do with what the Bible says about controversial moral or ethical issues, such as abortion, homosexuality, the death penalty, euthanasia, or war. Or hot potatoes can be broader social issues such as the role of women in leadership or science vs. faith.

6. *For instance, Genesis 1 is often a flashpoint for controversy regarding the creation/evolution debate and the age of the earth. Read Genesis 1. What genre does this belong to and why? Write down your observations and reasons.*

One of the reasons for this controversy is trying to determine which genre Genesis 1 belongs to. As you may recall from Session 2 (and from the Bible overview diagram on page 4), Genesis 1 belongs to the "Historical books" section of the Old Testament, and as such deserves to be read as history. Therefore, some would make the case that the morning/evening rhythm present in the text refers to seven literal 24-hour periods. However, the literary style of Genesis 1 can be described as poetic because it uses some of the typical aspects of poetry such as the parallelism of each section and the repetition of words and phrases throughout the passage. This could argue for a more symbolic rather than literal reading of Genesis 1. Even given the tools we've discussed in this study guide, you can see why Christians differ on how to most faithfully interpret Genesis 1. However, the larger point of the passage is that God is the Creator of everything.

Again, here is where having a Bible study toolkit is helpful. When addressing a controversial issue, simply finding all the Bible has to say about the topic using a concordance or topical index of the Bible is the difference between arguing from ignorance and having a biblically informed perspective.

7. *If someone has a concordance or topical index, pick a controversial issue and see how many relevant Bible verses or passages you can find on that topic. Remember, the goal here is not to argue our point of view on this issue, so take a chill pill. Our goal is to see what biblical material we can discover on the topic.*

As our "Reading the Bible 101" study draws to an end, let's take time to affirm one another.

8. *What have you appreciated about the contributions of the other members of the group?*

9. *What has happened in your own understanding of the Bible and desire to read it going forward? How can our group encourage one another to continue in this daily habit? Then close in prayer.*