

Dealing with Difficult Texts

By Matthew McKellar

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read the comments related to 2 Timothy 3:16 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: In light of the reality of difficult texts in the Bible, why are the words “all” and “profitable” so important?

Assignment Two

Read the comments related to 2 Timothy 2:15 and John 17:17 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What do both of these verses affirm about the Word of God? Why does this affirmation matter?

Assignment Three

Read the comments related to 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: Which three truths about Jesus are emphasized in these verses?

Scripture to Memorize

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. 2 Timothy 2:15

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will understand the basic biblical background and approach for dealing with difficult texts in Scripture.

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It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

At the beginning of the year, Cathy made a renewed commitment to read and study the Bible. However, after a few weeks she became discouraged and discontinued her regular reading. She told a friend that she found the Bible too difficult to understand and apply to life. Have you ever felt this way? What advice would you offer to Cathy?

Affirming the Nature of Scripture

Read 2 Timothy 3:16–17 out loud.

Studying the Passage

In this passage, Paul addressed Timothy and encouraged him to continue in what he had learned from Scripture (see 2 Timothy 3:14–15).

Verse 16. All. This term is important because Paul included *all* Scripture in the description that follows in verses 16–17. Whether difficult or easy to understand, all parts of the Bible are inspired and authoritative. **Scripture.** We know by reading both the Old and New Testaments that each presents itself as God's Word. Therefore, we can view this word as a synonym for the Bible. **Breathed out by God.** This phrase forms the foundation for the Bible's inspiration and authority. In Greek, this phrase is a single word that combines the words "God" and "breath." God Himself is the source of the Bible. **profitable.** This word means "beneficial or useful" and is followed by a description of four areas in which the Bible is beneficial. These are teaching or instruction, reproof or warning/admonition, correction or setting straight, and training or discipline in the way of the Lord (righteousness).

Verse 17. Complete, equipped . . . work. This verse addresses the ultimate purpose of Scripture. The Bible, including difficult texts, was given to us with the goal that we might be equipped to say and do those things that honor God.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week may now share a report.

Praying for Illumination

Read Psalm 119:18, 34 and John 16:12–15 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Psalm 119 celebrates the wonder and desirability of God's Word in twenty-two stanzas, each beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. When using words such as *law*, *precepts*, *statutes*, and *testimonies*, the psalmist referred to Scripture. Carefully observe the requests in the following verses.

Psalm 119:18. Open my eyes . . . behold. This phrase records the psalmist's prayer for understanding. He recognized his dependence on God with reference to a proper understanding and appreciation of Scripture. He knew he needed illumination. Such a request is appropriate and necessary when dealing with difficult texts.

Psalm 119:34. Give me understanding. This verse offers another example of a request for illumination. The psalmist asked for insight and comprehension in order that he might keep and observe God's Word with all of his heart.

Discussion Questions

Read John 16:12–15 out loud. These verses record some of the instructions Jesus gave regarding His departure and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Prior to this passage, what does Jesus call the Holy Spirit (see John 16:7)? Also, observe that Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit with the pronoun "He" (see John 16:8). Why is this significant? Finally, in verses 12–15, what does Jesus tell His disciples the Holy Spirit will do? (Hint: Look for the verbs in verses 13–14.)

Letting Scripture Interpret Scripture

Read 2 Timothy 2:15 and John 17:17 out loud.

Studying the Passage, 2 Timothy 2:15

2 Timothy 2:15. Rightly handling. This phrase comes from a single Greek word that means "to cut straight." The disciple is to be diligent so that he or she will have no embarrassment or shame because of ungodly behavior or careless treatment of God's Word. He is to handle Scripture reverently and to avoid reading his own ideas into the text. **word of truth.** Because every word of the Bible is true, it never contradicts itself. This is an important principle to remember when dealing with difficult texts. Wise disciples work to understand selected Scripture passages in light of similar passages elsewhere in the Bible.

John 17:17. Sanctify. This word means "to set apart" and is connected to the concept of holiness. **truth.** God is the source and standard of truth. Every word that proceeds from Him can be trusted. The prayer of Jesus for His disciples is that they might be set apart by the absolute truth of God's Word.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week may now share a report.

Emphasizing the Main Things

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 out loud.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week may now share a report.

Studying the Passage, vv. 3–4

When Paul wrote to the disciples at Corinth, he placed primary emphasis on Jesus and, specifically, His death, burial and resurrection.

Verse 3. of first importance. Paul had many important things to communicate. This phrase indicates what he believed to be worthy of the greatest emphasis. **Died . . . buried . . . raised.** These words summarize the content of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. Without Christ's sacrificial death for our sins and His triumphant resurrection from the grave, there is no gospel and disciples have no hope. **In accordance with the Scriptures.** Notice that this assertion appears twice in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. The phrase emphasizes that the Bible is a book that points ultimately to Jesus Christ and His saving work. A number of prophecies in the Old

Testament predict and foreshadow the cross, and the New Testament repeatedly confirms Christ as the Lord before whom every knee shall bow.

One commentator, with reference to handling Scripture accurately, stated: “The main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things” (Alistair Begg). Any study of difficult texts should be done with this perspective in mind. The Bible is God’s revelation of Himself that finds its complete fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

On Your Own

In the space below, list two or three texts of Scripture you find difficult to understand. After listing them, pause briefly to pray for illumination (“Open my eyes”) as the psalmist did.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below, and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Prayer

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

At Home: Nail It Down

Six key passages provide understanding concerning how to approach and deal with difficult texts in the Bible (2 Timothy 3:16–17; Psalm 119:18, 34; John 16:12–15; 2 Timothy 2:15; John 17:17; 1 Corinthians 15:3–4). While recognizing that some passages of Scripture are easier to understand than others, the growing disciple must not avoid difficult texts. The Bible itself offers insights into how to handle them in a way that brings increased clarity and confidence.

Remember:

- All Scripture is God breathed, authoritative, and profitable for equipping disciples (2 Timothy 3:16–17).
- Disciples pray for understanding and illumination of difficult passages (Psalm 119:18, 34).
- The Holy Spirit indwells disciples as their “Helper” and guides them in the truth (John 16:7, 13).
- Scripture interprets Scripture.
- The Bible never contradicts itself (2 Timothy 2:15; John 17:17).
- Disciples keep their focus on the main things as they approach the Bible, especially the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. All Scripture points to God’s fulfillment of His plan in and through His Son (1 Corinthians 15:3–4; Hebrews 1:1–4).

To summarize, follow these steps when dealing with difficult texts:

1. Affirm that all Scripture is true.
2. Pray for understanding and illumination.
3. Let Scripture interpret Scripture.
4. Emphasize the main things.

Disciples who “accurately handle the word of truth” grow in their understanding of the Bible and in their love for the Savior to whom it points.

Follow up Question

What are some basic guidelines for dealing with difficult texts of Scripture and how may they be applied?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.