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THE BIBLE, ITS OWN INTERPRETER

We sometimes hear questions like: “Why are there so many different denominations? How is it that they all claim to believe the Bible, yet hold differing doctrines?”

One reason for differences—perhaps the major reason—is a failure to let the Bible be its own interpreter. We should consider *all* that the Bible says on a given subject, not basing conclusions on partial evidence. What may not be fully explained in one verse, is often clarified in another. Jesus put it this way: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by EVERY WORD that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4).

Sometimes we hear it said: “One can prove *anything* by the Bible!” In a sense this is true, if we do not live “by every word of God,” but take only *part* of what the Bible says.

You may have heard the story about a man who supposed he had found a scripture in favor of smoking cigarettes—Genesis 24:64: “Rebekah...lighted off the camel.”

Another story is told of an old holiness preacher who said women must have long, uncut hair. But when some of them started putting their long hair on top of their heads in a top knot, he preached against this. His text was Matthew 24:17: “Top knot come down”!

In allowing the Bible to be its own interpreter, we should take the *total testimony* of scripture, allowing the clear verses to explain the unclear—not the other way around. Sometimes there are verses that appear (at least on the surface) to be in conflict with each other. For example:

One verse says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31); but another says that even demons believe and tremble (James 2:19). Obviously it is not enough to have some vague belief in God. If our believing in Jesus Christ does not bring about dramatic changes in our lives, do we *really* believe?

I recall my long-time friend, Jim Westbrook, using this illustration years ago in a message: One day while washing his car, someone said to him,

“I believe in washing my car, always having it look nice and clean. I never do it, but I *believe* in it.”

“No you don’t,” Jim responded. “If you *really* believed in keeping your car clean, you would do it!”

One verse says, “A man is justified by *faith* without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28). Another says, “By *works* a man is justified, and not by faith only” (James 2:24). Since *all* scripture is given by inspiration of God, to pit one verse against another cannot be the answer. Instead we should take all verses on a given subject and find the harmony of scripture.

Our works could never merit our salvation; salvation is by grace, a free gift, not of works (Eph. 2:8,9). But doesn’t the Bible say to “*work out our salvation*”?

Let me answer this way: Suppose a person is given a membership to a health club, paid for by someone else. When the person to whom the membership was given goes there to exercise, to lift weights, to *work out*, he is not “working out” to *pay* for his membership. He works out because he is *already* a member. Someone else already paid the price. So it is with salvation. Our works could never merit a membership in the body of Christ. But because the price has already been paid (1 Cor. 6:20), we “*work out our own salvation with fear and trembling*” (Phil. 2:12,13).

If we put a trailer *in front* of our car and attempted to push it to a distant city, how difficult it would be! But if the trailer *follows* the car, it is a different matter. So is it with faith and works. Faith is first; works follow.

There is a tendency today to consider water baptism as something *separate* from repentance and believing in Jesus Christ. But in the early church, I believe it is correct to say, baptism was considered *part of the package*: “He that believes *and is baptized* shall be saved”; “Repent *and be baptized*” (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38, etc.). When people received Christ, *they were baptized*—and baptism followed soon: “the same day,” “the same hour of the night” (Acts 2:41; 16:33, etc.). It was not considered unimportant.

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said: “Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel” (1 Cor. 1:17). Oddly enough, some have taken this to mean that Paul did not believe in water baptism! But the very context mentions some of the people he had baptized—like Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas (verses 14-16). That the Corinthian converts were baptized there can be no doubt. Turning to the book of Acts, we read that Paul took the gospel to Corinth, “and *many* of the Corinthians hearing believed, *and were baptized*” (Acts 18:8).

The fact that Paul did the preaching and usually had someone else do the baptizing, should not be misconstrued to mean the gospel he preached did away with water baptism.

Sometimes clarification for a verse comes simply by reading the *very next verse*. The following is an example:

We have often heard people say something like this: “We need to lift up Jesus. Jesus said if he is lifted up, he will draw all men unto him.” While it is true we should exalt Christ in our preaching, and in other ways, that is not the point here. When Jesus spoke of being lifted up, he was speaking of his *death*—that he would be killed by *crucifixion*!

“And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. THIS HE SAID, SIGNIFYING WHAT DEATH HE SHOULD DIE” (John 12:32,33).

Jesus would not die from sickness. He would not die from old age. He would not die from being stoned or thrown over a cliff. He would not die by being drowned at sea. He would die by being lifted up—by crucifixion. The significance of this amazing prediction is not realized when it is misapplied.

To the Christians at Thessalonica, Paul wrote: “Pray *without ceasing*” (1 Thess. 5:17). Some have taken this to mean we should pray all the time; should never stop praying; should always be in an attitude of prayer. The fact is: no one has ever done this! Even *Jesus* ceased to pray. “As he was praying in a certain place, when he *ceased*...” (Luke 11:1).

Suppose a man I had not seen in five years said to me, “I haven’t stopped praying for you; I *always* remember you in prayer.” I would not take this to mean that every minute of every day for the past five years he had been praying for *me*. I would take this to mean he had continued to pray for me *on a regular basis*.

That this was the meaning of Paul’s words about praying without ceasing becomes evident as we compare scripture with scripture, allowing the Bible to be its own interpreter. Paul prayed without ceasing for the Romans (Rom. 1:9). He prayed without ceasing for the Colossians (Col. 1:9). He prayed without ceasing for the Ephesians (Eph. 1:16). He prayed without ceasing for Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3). If “without ceasing” meant to pray and never stop praying in the absolute sense, if Paul prayed without ceasing for the Romans, he would have had no time to pray for the Colossians or the others he mentioned! To pray “without ceasing” speaks of consistent and faithful prayer. It is not a command to do the impossible.

A somewhat similar example may be seen in the term “unquenchable fire.” John the Baptist preached that every tree that did not bring forth good fruit would be cut down “and cast into the fire”; and that the chaff, separated from the wheat, would be burned up “with *unquenchable* fire” (Matt. 3:10-12). Does biblical wording about *unquenchable* fire or a *fire not quenched*, necessarily mean a fire that will *never stop burning*? So some have taken it.

But this term was commonly used when God’s judgment was pronounced upon various cities in the Old Testament—like Jerusalem. Here are some verses to consider:

“Because they have forsaken me...my wrath shall be kindled against this place, and *shall not be quenched*” (2 Kings 22:17).

“My fury shall come forth like fire, and burn that *none can quench it*, because of the evil of your doings” (Jer. 4:4).

“I have set my face against this city...it will be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire...that *none can quench it*” (Jer. 21:10-14).

“My anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place...and it shall burn, and *shall not be quenched*” (Jer. 7:20).

“I will kindle a fire in the gates thereof, it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and *it shall not be quenched*” (Jer. 17:27).

So it was, when the king of Babylon came against Jerusalem and carried out the Divine judgment, the city was burned with fire (Jer. 52:12,13). The fire that burned in the gates thereof was not quenched, but it did not continue to burn after its purpose was accomplished. Years later, when Nehemiah went to Jerusalem, he mentioned gates that had been “consumed with fire” (Neh. 2:13), but they were not still burning!

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem” (Psa. 122:6). These words, sometimes seen on bumper stickers, or emphasized in other ways, are understood by some as a command to pray for the peace of *present-day* Jerusalem. This, some believe, should be a prayer *priority*.

We are not against praying for the peace of Jerusalem—or Los Angeles, New York, London, Moscow, or any other city. But if we compare scripture with scripture, a more complete understanding of Psalms 122:6 comes into view.

In the Old Testament context, Jerusalem was the center for the worship of the true God. He chose to place his presence there; its temple was the house of God (Psa. 122:1); people prayed toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10); it was the city of God, the city of the great King (Psa. 48:1,2); its throne was called the throne of the Lord (1 Chron. 29:23). The status of Jerusalem in God’s program was much different then than now.

Back then, when righteousness prevailed in Jerusalem, there was “*peace* on all sides round about...people dwelling safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree” (1 Kings 4:24,25). But later, when righteousness did *not* prevail in Jerusalem, it was marked for judgment. Under those circumstances, the Lord said *not* to pray for Jerusalem (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11, etc.). There was not going to be *peace* (Jer. 6:14; 12:12, etc.).

Now here is an interesting twist: When judgment fell and Nebuchadnezzar carried away captives from Jerusalem to Babylon, God’s message to those captives was this: “Seek the *peace of the city* where I have caused you to be carried away captives, and *pray* unto the Lord for it: for in the *peace* thereof shall you have peace” (Jer. 29:7). Notice, in this context, they were not told to pray for the peace of *Jerusalem*, but for the peace of *Babylon*—as strange as that sounds!

Centuries later, at the time of Jesus, Jerusalem was again facing judgment that would come within that generation. The temple and city would be destroyed, according to Jesus, so that one stone would not be left upon another (Matt. 23:35-38; 24:1,2). There would not be “peace” for Jerusalem, but it would

be encircled by the enemy and laid “even with the ground” (Lk. 19:41-44). Does any one suppose Jesus would have said, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem”? It was not going to happen; the cup had filled and finally overflowed—in A.D. 70.

About 25 years ago, in Jerusalem, I heard a man speak who was, it seemed to me, 100 percent pro-Israel and 100 percent anti-Palestinian. He told of numerous atrocities the Palestinians had committed—as though one side was totally innocent, the other totally guilty. I turned to a Lutheran pastor seated close to me and asked what he thought. His response: “I am a John 3:16 man.”

A John 3:16 man! In other words, God so loved the *world*—not just one race or group of people exclusively. If we pray for the peace of Jerusalem today, this is fine. Living in that very troubled area, people there *need* peace! But if our praying for the peace of Jerusalem is done in some *exclusive* sense—as though we are praying *for* one group of people and *against* others in that part of the world, I think we have missed the spirit of John 3:16.

That modern-day Israel has experienced unpeaceful conditions, with numerous wars and conflicts, ever since it became a nation in 1948, is a fact of history. With this in mind, consider an inconsistency in the now-popular teaching that Russia will *soon* come down from the north to battle with Israel. Ezekiel 38 is quoted. But it does not fit.

The setting for the Israel described by Ezekiel was that of a *peaceful* land!—so peaceful and secure that it needed no defenses, locks, walls, etc. The enemy is poetically represented as saying, “I will go up to the land of unwallled villages; I will go to them that are AT REST, that DWELL SAFELY, *all* of them dwelling without walls, and having neither bars nor gates” (Ezek. 38:11). I have yet to hear a plausible explanation how the peaceful description given by Ezekiel could possibly refer to *present-day* Israel.

Another point to consider: Was the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948 the fulfillment of Jesus’ words about the budding of the *fig tree*? “Now learn a parable of the fig tree; when his branch is yet tender, and puts forth leaves, you know that summer is nigh: so likewise, when you shall see all these things...” (Matt. 24:32-34). Apparently Jesus was *not* referring to modern-day Israel, for when we turn to Luke’s account of the very same passage, we read:

“Behold the fig tree, AND ALL THE TREES: when they now shoot forth, you see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. So likewise, when you see these things come to pass...” (Lk. 21:29). If the fig tree here represents the nation of Israel, then “all the trees” would have to represent *all the nations*. For this reason, even Finnis Dake (usually quite dispensational in his thinking), states in a note in *Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible*: “The fig tree...is universally interpreted to mean the Jewish nation, *but this could not possibly be the meaning.*”

Jesus was drawing an illustration from nature. He said that when the fig tree and *all* the trees put forth leaves, people recognize that summer is near—something they could “know

of themselves.” *So likewise* when they would see certain things happen, they could know the time for the fulfillment of his prophecy was near. It was a comparative statement, similar to his words that a cloud rising out of the west precedes a rain shower; or a south wind precedes hot weather (Lk. 12:54,55).

In the Great Commission, as recorded in Mark 16, Jesus said to go into all the world, to preach the gospel and baptize believers. He then spoke of signs that would follow those who believe, one of which was: “They shall take up serpents.” We have all heard of little backwoods sects that practice this. But have you ever known someone who actually did it?

Let me tell you about James Hart, one of the finest old Christian gentlemen I ever knew. He had preached a number of years, but by the time I knew him, was up in years, unable to do much preaching anymore. He was blind in one eye and lived in a little house he had built with his own hands many years before. His only vice, if one wants to call it that, was that he liked to drink Pepsi. When I would pass through Olivehurst, the little northern California town where he lived, I would stop and visit. He was not well educated, but because he had read the Bible so much over the years, he knew things I did not know. I learned from him.

One thing that comes to mind: Many picture the 144,000 as a group of people to be converted to Christ during a yet-future tribulation period. But James believed their conversion already happened. They were “the *first fruits* unto the Lamb” (Rev. 14:4), he pointed out, not the *last!*

When reading became difficult for him, he gave me his books, including *Clarke’s Commentary* and *Josephus*, which I still have. I preached his wife’s funeral, and a few years later, when he was in his 90s, conducted his service also.

But here is the part about snake handling, as bizarre as it is. As a young man, James lived in a rural part of Tennessee. A couple came to town to hold revival meetings, during which many came to Christ. They also prayed for the sick, claiming the promise of Mark 16:18, “They shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover.” During these meetings, James was stirred as never before to make his life count for Christ. Consequently, a year later, when he learned this couple would be coming back to town for meetings, he was excited.

One night during the second revival, they said they had come into more light since the previous year. The *same* passage in Mark that spoke of healing, also said to take up serpents! On the platform they had a wooden bucket which contained poisonous copperhead snakes. The preacher’s wife, taking a pin from her hair, flipped open the lid, pulling out one of the snakes, and lifted it up toward the ceiling. Others were invited to come up and do the same—but only those who felt they “had enough faith.”

In the emotion of the moment, James (who had always been *afraid* of snakes!) rushed to the front and grabbed a snake out of the bucket, heading up one aisle and down the other while the snake repeatedly struck his wrist. His two daughters, who were just little girls at the time, never forgot that night! He showed me the faint scars on his wrist where the snake bit him.

He suffered no ill effects, but later there was some question whether the snake he handled was actually poisonous.

James never took up a serpent again. He came to understand that the verse in Mark should be understood as an *accidental* encounter with a serpent, not something one would do deliberately. As he compared scripture with scripture, he understood that when Paul took up a serpent, it was accidental (Acts 28:3-6).

Just as one would not deliberately sin, just so God would forgive him; or one would not deliberately become sick, just so God would heal him; so, he reasoned, one should not “tempt the Lord” by deliberately handling a poisonous snake.

In this context—and in many more—understanding comes when we take *all* that the Bible says, allowing **THE BIBLE TO BE ITS OWN INTERPRETER!** —Ralph Woodrow



Ralph and Arlene Woodrow at Niagara Falls 9/11/06

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