

Powerful Christian Living

Chapter Six

How to Understand the Bible, Part 2¹

We have been learning that we can understand the Bible properly if we first take the time to read it. We also need to understand the biblical meaning of words and the figures of speech that are used². Finally we must understand the context in which a verse is set and to whom a particular section of Scripture is written. When we follow these simple principles the Bible will yield its rich treasure.

In his second letter to his young associate Timothy, the apostle Paul gives a command about teaching the Bible to others. He wrote,

You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.
2 And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses,
commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.
(2 Timothy 2:1, 2)

The purpose of sound Bible teaching is to pass on the truths of the Word of God from one generation to another. And if we are going to do this correctly we need to take heed to another of the apostle's commands.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does
not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.
(2 Timothy 2:15)

The commandment of the apostle is that we are to be diligent in our study of Scripture so that we rightly divide it. What does this mean? The two English words "rightly dividing" are translated from one Greek word. The word is *orthotomounta*, which means to make an accurate or straight cut. The word is used in carpentry as a reference to being exact in your measurement and cutting. Thus in our study of the Bible we are to delve into it with precision and accuracy. In other words there is a correct way to understand the Bible and there is a wrong way.

Sometimes people will bring a pagan concept into their understanding of Scripture. Sometimes they will take a verse out of context to try and prove a point. At other times Bible

¹ This teaching also includes the doctrine of conditional immortality and the state of the dead.

² A very good reference work on the subject of figures of speech in the Bible is "Figures of Speech Used In The Bible" by E.W. Bullinger (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan).

translators may translate a word in a misleading manner or use capitalization and punctuation marks to try and make the Bible teach something that it does not. This brings us to the fifth key in how to understand the Bible.

- **Be aware of translators and editors additions to the Scriptures**

The way Bible translators use capitalization of words or punctuation marks or even chapter and verse markings may alter what the Bible is really saying. Let's look at chapter and verse markings for example. Although chapter and verse markings are an essential tool to help us find certain sections of Scripture they are not inspired of God. And at times they make it more difficult to follow the flow of thought. Here is an example from the gospel of John.

And everyone went to his own house.
(John 7:53)

John 7:53 is the end of the chapter as we have it in our Bibles, and then begins chapter 8.

But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.
(John 8:1)

As far as the context and the flow of thought, it looks as if John 8:1 should really be the last verse of chapter 7. Then we would read,

And everyone went to his own house.
But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

This would make more sense as far as the flow of thought is concerned. Then chapter 8 would logically begin with John 8:2 and we would have something like this:

And everyone went to his own house.
But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives.

Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them.
(John 8:2)

If we rearranged the chapter and verse markings like the example above then John 8:2 would become the new John 8:1 and we would not have cut up the flow of thought or the context. You should know that in the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts there were no verse markings or punctuation marks. It wasn't in their style of writing. I'll grant you that verse markings and punctuation marks are very helpful, but sometimes they can change what the Bible is really teaching us.

If you end a sentence with a period or a question mark you have two different meanings. There is a big difference in saying "I love you!" with an exclamation mark and "I love you?" with a question mark. Let's examine a section of Scripture where punctuation adversely affects an important Bible doctrine.

There were also two others, criminals, led with Him to be put to death. 33 And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left. 34 Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do."

And they divided His garments and cast lots. 35 And the people stood looking on. But even the rulers with them sneered, saying, "He saved others; let Him save Himself if He is the Christ, the chosen of God." 36 The soldiers also mocked Him, coming and offering Him sour wine, 37 and saying, "If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself." 38 And an inscription also was written over Him in letters of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew:

39 Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." 40 But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? 41 And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." 42 Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." 43 And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."
(Luke 23:32-43)

Verse 43 and others like it have been used to teach the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. This doctrine states that there is an immortal part of us that goes on living after we die. And the way verse 43 is punctuated with commas does seem to indicate that on that very day of the criminal's death he went to heaven. But if you change where the commas are located then the verse teaches something very different. I've punctuated verse 43 in two distinct ways below.

Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in paradise.

This is the way the New King James Version and most other Bibles punctuate the verse, because of a prior belief in the immortality of the soul. But what if it was punctuated differently?

Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in paradise.

The way the verse is punctuated in most Bibles you have a present reality. The criminal will be in heaven the very day that he dies. But if you punctuate it the way I did then you have immortality as a future hope. So which is it? What is the right dividing of the Word?

If you remember one of the keys to understanding the Bible is that we must understand the biblical meaning of words. Luke 23: 43 is used to teach that believers go straight to heaven when they die. But the verse says nothing at all about heaven. Jesus said, “you will be with Me in **paradise**.” Our next question then is what and where is “paradise”? Let’s go to the Bible for the answer and we will begin in Genesis 2.

The LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. 9 And out of the ground the LORD God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life *was* also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
(Genesis 2:8, 9)

These verses state that after God created man He placed him in a garden in Eden. Eden is a Hebrew word that can literally be translated as “paradise.” In fact the Greek version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint uses the word “paradise” in Genesis 2:8 for the word “Eden.” The original paradise was a place on earth. It was a beautiful garden. After Adam and Eve sinned they were expelled from paradise³ and you never hear of paradise again. Paradise is regained only after Christ returns to this earth at the end of this age to establish God’s kingdom on the earth.

You need to understand that before pagan influences came into the church around the second to the third centuries, believers did not believe in an immortal soul⁴. They did not believe that when a person died he or she went straight to heaven or to hell. The hope for everlasting life for the righteous rested in a future resurrection of the dead to immortality. The Old Testament prophet Daniel, also Job, and King David and Jesus Christ all understood the truth of everlasting life at the time of the resurrection.

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
Some to everlasting life,
Some to shame *and* everlasting contempt.
(Daniel 12:2)

³ Genesis 3:22-24

⁴ . . . the reinterpretation of biblical theology in terms of Greek philosophers has been both widespread throughout the centuries and everywhere destructive to the essence of the Christian faith . . . Neither Catholic or Protestant theology is based on biblical theology. In each case we have the domination of Christian theology by Greek thought.” N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, (Epworth Press, London, 1955), pp. 187, 188.)

For I know *that* my Redeemer lives,
And He shall stand at last on the earth;
²⁶ And after my skin is destroyed, this *I know*,
That in my flesh I shall see God
(Job 19:25, 26)

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness;
I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness.
(Psalm 17:15)

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. 25 Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. 26 For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, 27 and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. 28 Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice 29 and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.
(John 5:24-29)

The common belief in the immortality of the soul is wrong and unbiblical. The idea comes from pagan philosophies⁵. Here is what the Bible says about the condition of man in death.

Return, O LORD, deliver me!
Oh, save me for Your mercies' sake!
5 For in death *there is* no remembrance of You;
In the grave who will give You thanks?
(Psalm 6:4, 5)

The dead do not praise the LORD,
Nor any who go down into silence.
(Psalm 115:17)

Do not put your trust in princes,
Nor in a son of man, in whom *there is* no help.

⁵ See Chapters 6 and 7 in this author's book "Foundations for Faith" that can be found at the E-Book section of the web site www.graceministryinternational.org

4 His spirit departs, he returns to his earth;
In that very day his plans perish.
(Psalm 146:3, 4)

All things *come* alike to all:
One event *happens* to the righteous and the wicked;
To the good, the clean, and the unclean;
To him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice.
As is the good, so *is* the sinner;
He who takes an oath as *he* who fears an oath.

³ This *is* an evil in all that is done under the sun: that one thing
happens to all. Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil;
madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead.

⁴ But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is
better than a dead lion.

⁵ For the living know that they will die;
But the dead know nothing,
And they have no more reward,
For the memory of them is forgotten.

⁶ Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished;
Nevermore will they have a share
In anything done under the sun.

⁷ Go, eat your bread with joy,
And drink your wine with a merry heart;
For God has already accepted your works.

⁸ Let your garments always be white,
And let your head lack no oil.

⁹ Live joyfully with the wife whom you love all the days of your vain life
which He has given you under the sun, all your days of vanity; for that *is*
your portion in life, and in the labor which you perform under the sun.

¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with your might; for *there is* no
work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.
(Ecclesiastes 9:2-10)

Immortality is not a part of our human nature. Without salvation through Jesus Christ we are doomed to perish because of our sins.⁶ This should have been clear to Bible believing people, because of John 3:16 which says,

⁶ Romans 6:23 states that the wages of sin is death. Unbelievers are not tormented in a fiery place called hell. The Hebrew word Translated hell is *sheol*, the Greek word is *hades* and both words mean the realm of the dead or gravedome . In the common vernacular this is simply the place where the dead are laid to rest and everyone who dies rests in *sheol/hades*. There is another word translated as "hell" and this is the Greek word *gehenna*. This was the name for the burning garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. This fire burned continually, but what was thrown in was burned up and destroyed. Unbelievers will face not eternal torment but the second death in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10-15).

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.
(John 3:16)

It is clear from the above verse that there are only two destinies for every human being. Either we will receive everlasting life through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ or we will perish. The Greek word translated “perish” is *apollumi*, which means to be utterly and totally destroyed.⁷ Only believers in God and the Lord Jesus Christ⁸ will receive everlasting life. And they will receive this gift when Christ returns and raises them from the dead, as the following Scriptures assert.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, *and* has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man *came* death, by Man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.

Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality.⁵⁴ So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “ *O Death, where is your sting?
O Hades, where is your victory?*”

⁵⁶ The sting of death *is* sin, and the strength of sin *is* the law.⁵⁷ But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

(1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 50-58)

And where will this everlasting life be lived; in heaven? No we will experience everlasting life here on a restored earth—in paradise.

⁷ Unbelievers and the wicked are not tormented in a fiery hell forever. The penalty for sin is death; they perish. See Psalm 1:6; 2:12; 37:20; 68:2; 73:27; John 10:28; Romans 2:12; 2 Corinthians 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:10; 2 Peter 3:9

⁸ Both Old Testament and New Testament believers

For evildoers shall be cut off;
But those who wait on the LORD,
They shall inherit the earth.
(Psalm 37:9)

Blessed *are* the meek,
For they shall inherit the earth.
(Matthew 5:5)

Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.
9 And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals;
For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,
10 And have made us kings and priests to our God;
And we shall reign on the earth.”
(Revelation 5:8-10)

And finally, when will the Lord Jesus return to raise the dead and establish the kingdom of God? No one knows for sure. But it will be after the time of the great tribulation when the anger of the devil manifested in the anti-christ is loosed upon the world.

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 30 Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. 31 And He will send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.
(Matthew 24:29-31)

And it will be at the right time so that all who repent may be saved and not perish.

But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day *is* as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all

should come to repentance.

¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.

¹¹ Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner *of persons* ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, ¹² looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? ¹³ Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

(2 Peter 3:8-13)

So, what should the correct punctuation be for Luke 23:43? It should read as follows: "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in paradise." In other words Jesus was saying "Have no fear. I say to you today, even though we are in this horrible condition of being crucified and we will die, there is day coming in the future when you shall be with me in Paradise." Jesus was proclaiming the hope of the resurrection to this man. And the hope of a future resurrection unto everlasting life is the sure and certain hope for every believer.