

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Things Which Hinder A Correct Interpretation Of The Bible

By Bobby Witherington

There are three fundamental truths which should strengthen and encourage every sincere heart, namely: (1) there is a God, (Gen. 1:1, Heb. 11:6), (2) God created man in His Own *“image,”* (Gen. 1:26-27), and (3) God has revealed Himself to man, (John 1:14,18; 14:7-9). But not only has God revealed Himself to man, we affirm that the **Bible** is the medium through which God communicates His will to man (cf. 1 Cor.2:10-13; Eph. 3:3-5).

However, even though God, in His wonderful providence has revealed and preserved His will, it is a fact that very few people have a working knowledge of the Bible. Multitudes claim to be reading and following the same Bible, but they reach opposite conclusions and teach contradictory doctrines. This happens, even though we are admonished to *“understand what the will of the Lord is”* (Eph. 5:17), and an inspired apostle (with reference to the sacred truths he had penned) said that *“you may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ”* (Eph. 3:4). In brief, this apostle, concerning the things of God, said that we **can** *“understand”* what he understood, as well as the truths he penned.

But the sad fact remains that very few people – even professed Bible students – seem to have a working knowledge of the Bible! Why is this? Of course, there are many reasons, chief among them being the fact that there are many factors which hinder a correct interpretation of the Bible. Some of these hindrances are as follows:

1. The Desire to please others. Writing to the saints at Galatia, the apostle Paul said: *“For do I persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased man, I would not be a servant of Christ”* (Gal. 1:10). Man, by nature, is a social creature. Unless we have psychological problems, we all like to be liked. And this is not inherently bad, but when the desire to have **man’s** approval exceeds our desire to please **God**, then there is always the possibility that we might reach a false conclusion about a passage of Scripture – not because either the text or context leads itself to that conclusion – but because it enables us to “go along” and to get along with fellow human beings.

2. The belief that the Bible is the property of the “clergy” or the “priesthood.” Many have been taught from youth that no one can understand the scriptures unless he receives “expert help” from so-called “men of the cloth.” But nothing can be further from the truth. During the days of Christ’s earthly ministry the *“common people heard him gladly”* (Mark 12:37). But by way of contrast, it should be pointed out that the ones with the greatest misunderstanding of the true teachings of God were often the so-called learned men, including the majority of the religious **leaders** of the time! In fact, on one occasion the religious leaders of that day sent some officers to apprehend Jesus, but they returned empty-handed. The chief priests and Pharisees (their religious leaders) asked the officers, *“why have you not brought Him,”* and they replied that *“no man ever spoke like this man”* (John 7:45-46). It was at this point that the Pharisees asked the officers, *“Have any of the rulers or the Pharisees believed on Him”* (John 7:48)? You see, they had the idea that no teacher (not even Jesus Who fulfilled Old Testament prophecy and worked mighty miracles) was to be followed unless he had **their** approval!

3. Too much reverence for “big names” – especially if they happen to be popular preachers! In his letter to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul alluded to himself and to Apollos and stated that he did so in order that *“you may learn in us not to think of men beyond what is written”* (1 Cor. 4:6). However, notwithstanding the necessary implications of this verse, man professed (but uninspired) “authorities” have virtually been “canonized” – resulting in errors being handed down from generation to generation. Names such as

“Augustine,” “Calvin,” “Wesley,” “Luther,” etc., (men of the past) readily come to mind. Current names like “Graham,” “Osteen,” “Falwell,” etc., may be cited as examples. Many people today believe what they believe religiously – not because of what the Bible says – but because their beliefs were (or are) espoused by certain “great religious leaders” of the past or present. Friend, in view of the value of your soul (cf. Matt. 16:26), and the length of eternity, it ill behooves you to let any uninspired man of the past, or present, do your thinking (and studying) for you!

4. Using the Bible to prove doctrines already believed. It is one thing to earnestly study the Bible with a view in mind of learning what the Bible actually teaches, and something else entirely to jump here and there looking for “proof texts” (generally taken out of context) to confirm a belief already held. There are two words of similar sound (but of opposite meaning) which characterize different approaches to the reading of the Bible. One word is **Exegesis**, which means “to lead or to draw out.” When applied to Bible study, “exegesis” describes the action of the person who is trying to draw out of the text what the Holy Spirit included **in** the text – it is an honest effort to learn what the text (along with its context) actually says. **Eisegesis** on the other hand denotes the reading of one’s own ideas **into** the text, even though those thoughts are not actually contained in the text. The **Exegete** reads the Bible to **learn what it says** (and hopefully, with a view to obeying it!), whereas the **Eisegete** reads the Bible to make it “prove” what one **already believes**. Romans 5:1 may be cited to illustrate this point. In this verse the inspired apostle said: ***“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** By simply reading this verse for what it says, we have no difficulty concluding that a person is ***“justified by faith.”*** For that matter, other references reveal that the Bible attributes justification to several things, including faith. However, if the one who reads this text already believes a person is justified by ***“faith alone,”*** then when he reads Romans 5:1, he is likely to mentally insert ***“only”*** into the text, thereby concluding that a man is justified by faith alone. In so doing, he is **reading into** the text an idea which is not in the text itself, and which violates other scriptures, such as James 2:24, wherein another inspired writer said, ***“You see then that a person is justified by works, and not by faith only.”***

5. Human Creeds. It seems that the making of human creeds is like the making of ***“many books”*** – something to which ***“there is no end”*** (Eccl. 12:12). However, the Bible is complete; by it ***“the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work”*** (2 Tim. 3:17). Based on Galatians 1:7-8, we dare not ***“pervert the gospel of Christ.”*** We simply must not go beyond ***“the doctrine of Christ”*** (2 John 9)! The Bible virtually closes by warning us not to add to or take from the word of God (Rev. 22:18-19). However, every human creed devised for religious people contains something **more** than the Bible, or **less** than the Bible, or **different** from the Bible. If it contained nothing more, or less, or different from that recorded in the Bible, there would be no need for it!

6. Improper methods of Bible Study! Many people read the Bible regularly, but without any attempt to rightly divide ***“the word of truth”*** (2 Tim. 2:15). They often have a selected portion in mind which they read in order to cover their “daily Bible reading,” or they may simply read where the Bible “happens to fall open.” No effort is made to determine **who** is speaking in the selected text, **to whom** the message is addressed, or **what** the text (along with its context) is discussing. The result of such an approach is that they become like some whom the Bible describes – ***“always learning, and never coming to the knowledge of the truth”*** (2 Tim. 3:7).

7. Lack of Effort! When all is said and done, it must be admitted that ***“much study is wearisome to the flesh”*** (Eccl. 12:12). One has to pay a price to become learned in the sacred Scriptures. It takes time, effort, consistency, and discipline to acquire a good working knowledge of the sacred Scriptures. And, quite frankly, most people are simply not that interested in spiritual matters. The “bottom line” is this; their priorities are distorted, and they often go through life majoring in minors and minoring in majors. By way of contrast, the ***“blessed”*** or happy man of Psalm 1:1, 2, is one whose ***“delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.”***

We have mentioned a few of the main hindrances to a correct interpretation of the Scriptures – all of which, with humility, effort, honesty, much study, and consistency can be overcome. Concerning spiritual things, it surely behooves each one of us to ***“abound more and more in knowledge and all discernment”*** (Phil. 1:9). ■