

Do I Interpret the Bible Literally?

Seven Tests to See If I Truly Do

By George Zeller

INTRODUCTION

Dispensationalists seek to interpret the Bible literally, that is, to consistently understand the Scriptures in their plain, normal, natural, obvious sense, much like we would read and understand the newspaper, a book, a poem, an essay or other types of literature. Bernard Ramm says, "We use the word 'literal' in its dictionary sense: '...the natural or usual construction and implication of a writing or expression; following the ordinary and apparent sense of words; not allegorical or metaphorical' (*Webster's New International Dictionary*)."¹

Mal Couch and Charles Ryrie express this concept well:

*A normal reading of Scripture is synonymous with a consistent literal, grammatico-historical hermeneutic. When a literal hermeneutic is applied to the interpretation of Scripture, every word written in Scripture is given the normal meaning it would have in its normal usage. Proponents of a consistent, literal reading of Scripture prefer the phrase a normal reading of Scripture to establish the difference between literalism and letterism.*²

If God be the originator of language and if the chief purpose of originating it was to convey His message to humanity, then it must follow that He, being all-wise and all-loving, originated sufficient language to convey all that was in His heart to tell mankind. Furthermore, it must also follow that He would use language and expect people to understand it in its literal, normal, and plain sense. The Scriptures, then, cannot be regarded as an illustration of some special use of language so that in the interpretation of these Scriptures some deeper meaning of the words must be sought.³

The *Clarifying Statement on Dispensationalism*, published by the New England Bible Conference, says it this way:

¹ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 119.

² Mal Couch, General Editor, *An Introduction to Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 33.

³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 81.

The Bible must be interpreted literally which is the way language is normally and naturally understood. We recognize that the Bible writers frequently used figurative language which is a normal and picturesque way of portraying literal truth. The Bible must be understood in the light of the normal use of language, the usage of words, the historical and cultural background, the context of the passage and the overall teaching of the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15). Most importantly, the believer must study the Bible in full dependence upon the SPIRIT OF TRUTH whose ministry is to reveal Christ and illumine the minds and hearts of believers (John 5:39; 16:13-15; 1 Cor. 2:9-16). The natural, unregenerate man cannot understand or interpret correctly the Word of God. The things of God are foolishness to him, he cannot know them (1 Cor. 2:14), and his mind is blinded (Rom. 3:11; 2 Cor. 4:3-4).⁴

Dr. David L. Cooper, the founder of *The Biblical Research Society*, was proficient in the Biblical languages. He studied Greek under Dr. A.T. Robertson. Dr. Cooper is known for his “Golden Rule of Interpretation” which is as follows:

When the plain sense of Scripture
makes common sense,
seek no other sense;
Therefore, take every word
at its primary, ordinary,
usual, literal meaning
Unless the facts
of the immediate context,
studied in the light
Of related passages and
axiomatic and fundamental truths
indicate clearly otherwise.⁵

A shortened form of the above rule goes like this:

If the plain sense makes good sense seek no other sense lest it result in nonsense.

The opponents of dispensationalism sometimes depart from the above rule, and although they might not want to admit it, they seem to follow this rule:

⁴ *Clarifying Statement on Dispensationalism*, the official statement of the New England Bible Conference on Dispensationalism. This pamphlet is published by The Middletown Bible Church, 349 East St., Middletown, CT 06457. It is available upon request.

⁵ This rule was published regularly in Dr. Cooper's monthly magazine, *Biblical Research Monthly*.

If the plain sense does not fit my theological system, then I will seek some other sense, lest I should end up agreeing with the dispensationalists!

This is illustrated by an amillennialist, named Hamilton, who made this remarkable admission:

Now we must frankly admit that a literal interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies gives us just such a picture of an earthly reign of the Messiah as the premillennialist pictures.⁶

In other words, if a person really interprets the Bible prophecies literally, he will of necessity be a premillennialist, according to Hamilton, who himself was not one!

The dispensationalist believes that God means what He says and says what He means. In childlike faith he recognizes his need to simply take Him at His Word and rest upon His clear, normal, obvious statements.

Some of the opponents of dispensationalism claim that they too interpret the Bible literally. Here are seven simple tests to see if a person truly does:

Test #1—The Days of Genesis One

Do I understand the six days of creation to be literal twenty-four hour days?

“For *in six days* the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11).

God says that His work of creation happened in six days. Does He really mean what He says? Does He mean “six days” or does He mean something else? Can we take Him at His Word? How would a child understand this verse?

Today many teach that these six days of creation cannot refer to literal 24 hour days, but instead must represent long ages of time which would then correspond with the vast geologic ages theorized by evolutionary scientists and scholars.

But does normal interpretation allow for such a non-literal approach? How would Moses and the people of his day have understood Exodus 20:11 and Genesis chapter 1? The rules of language and word usage demand that we understand these as literal 24 hour days.

⁶ Cited by Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1981), 35.

Dr. John C. Whitcomb, a pioneer in the modern creationist movement, has mentioned the following significant points among others:

- 1) When a *numerical adjective* is attached to the word “day” (and there are two hundred known cases of this in the Old Testament) the meaning is *always* restricted to twenty-four hours (i.e., “first day,” “second day,” etc.). See a precise parallel in Numbers 7:12-78.
- 2) When the *plural form* (“days”) appears in the Old Testament (over seven hundred times) it *always* refers to literal days. See Joshua 6:14 (“six days”) where it is quite obvious that literal days are in view.
- 3) A creation “week” of six indefinite periods of time would hardly serve as a valid or meaningful pattern for Israel’s cycle of work and rest, as explained by God at Sinai in the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:9-11). How inconsistent to say that God worked *six long ages* (Exodus 20:11) to serve as a pattern for man to work *six literal days* (Exodus 20:9)! I’m not sure most men in the work force would want each work day to be equivalent to a long period of time, though this non-literal way of understanding “days” might appeal to them when it comes to their vacation weeks!⁷

Before the dawn of uniformitarian evolutionism, there was general unanimity among students of the Bible that the days of creation were six literal 24 hour days. The pressures of unsubstantiated scientific theory should not force Bible believers to abandon the natural sense of language.

Test #2—The Change in the Nature of Animals(Isaiah 11)

Do I understand Isaiah 11 to be describing a time when the nature of animals will actually be changed (from ferocious to gentle, from meat eating to plant eating, from poisonous to innocuous, etc.)?

“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play

⁷ John C. Whitcomb, *The Early Earth* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids:, revised edition, 1986), 28-30.

on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den" (Isaiah 11:6-8).

Does God really mean what He says in the above verses or does He mean something else? If we take these verses literally, according to the normal way in which words are understood, then we are forced to conclude that the kingdom has not yet arrived! If you go to any zoo, you will not find any lions eating straw. Today no loving mother would allow her child to play with a deadly poisonous snake.

The story is told of a Russian zookeeper who made this boast, "In our zoo here in Moscow, the wolf dwells with the lamb in the same cage, something which you Americans do not have." But he failed to mention that a new lamb had to be put in the cage every day!

An example of a non-literal approach is found in the *New Geneva Study Bible* (which some consider to be the Scofield Bible of Reformed Theology). Since its initial publication it has been renamed *The Reformation Study Bible*. According to the notes found in this Bible, verses which speak of the kingdom being free from the threat of wild animals should be understood "figuratively" to describe the "peace and security" and "reconciling love" that is found during this present age from the first advent until Christ's return.⁸

The inconsistency of this interpretation is seen by comparing it with another passage which refers to the diet of animals. The *New Geneva Study Bible* takes a very literal approach in its note under Genesis 1:29-30 (a passage which says that animals were originally vegetarian): "Animal diets were originally vegetarian."⁹ **Why do they understand Genesis chapter 1 literally and Isaiah chapter 11 figuratively?** Why does the plain sense make good sense in Genesis 1 but not in Isaiah 11, especially when both passages are speaking of the diet of animals? Could it be that Isaiah 11, understood literally, does not agree with their theological system which says that the kingdom is here and now, whereas the teaching of Genesis 1:29-30 does not threaten their theology? This illustrates the point that theologians are often inconsistent when it comes to their use of the literal hermeneutic, and they often tend to abandon the natural and normal meaning of words when the words describe kingdom conditions. Dispensationalists are known for their *consistent use* of the literal hermeneutic.

If anyone doubts that Isaiah 11:6-8 refers to a future kingdom and does not apply to this present age, try this experiment. Throw some straw into the lions' cage in the nearest zoo and see if any of these carnivorous predators show any interest in it! Then throw in a rib-eye steak and watch the action!

⁸ See notes under Isaiah 11:6-9 and Hosea 2:18. R.C. Sproul, General Editor, *New Geneva Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1043, 1363.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8. A detailed critique of the *New Geneva Study Bible* (*Reformation Study Bible*) is available upon request from the Middletown Bible Church, 349 East St., Middletown, CT 06457.

Test #3—The Thousand Year Kingdom of Revelation 20

Do I understand Revelation 20 to be describing a literal period of a thousand years during which time believers will reign with Christ?

Six times in Revelation chapter 20 reference is made to a period of a thousand years. Does God really mean what He says or is the “thousand years” supposed to be taken figuratively or symbolically to refer to something else?

Dr. Gary North, one of the founders of the postmillennial reconstructionist movement, sent out a newsletter in which he scolded dispensationalists for their failure to teach creationism, especially regarding the six literal days of the creation week.¹⁰ He attacked C.I.Scofield for holding to the gap theory, a position commonly held among many of the earlier dispensationalists, but rejected by many if not most dispensationalists today. North made the false accusation that no dispensational seminary takes a position on a recent creation and that no dispensational seminary takes a position that the days of Genesis 1 were literal 24 hour days. This accusation was false, evidenced by the fact that Grace Theological Seminary had published a written positional statement on this issue, entitled *Biblical Creationism*, which was adopted by its faculty on July 6, 1979. Many other dispensational schools also took a solid position on the six literal creation days as revealed by a publication of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America entitled, *IFCA Schools Questionnaire Composite* which was published in 1986. This questionnaire was sent to 263 Bible Institutes, Bible Colleges and Seminaries. Ninety-four schools responded to the questionnaire and one hundred and seventy schools did not respond. But of the schools who responded, fifty-five took a position in support of the days in Genesis 1 as literal 24 hour days; one school did not teach this and 30 schools did not take an official position on this issue.¹¹

Dr. North is to be commended for his literal approach to the first chapter of Genesis and his insistence that the six days of the creation week were literal 24 hour days. He takes Genesis 1 very literally and understands the six days in their normal and natural and obvious sense. Days mean days. "Morning and evening" means "morning and evening." "Fifth day" means "fifth day." If Dr. North were to follow the same literal approach that he uses in Genesis 1 and apply that to Revelation chapter 20, then he would be a premillennial dispensationalist and he would be forced to abandon his postmillennialism. But instead he abandons his literal hermeneutic. The thousand years in Revelation 20 become very symbolic. The term "thousand years" (mentioned six times in Revelation 20) does not really mean a thousand years.

¹⁰ Gary North, *Christian Reconstruction*, "Christianity and Progress" (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, May/June, 1987, Vol. XI, No. 3), 3-4.

¹¹ George Parsons and George Zeller, *Schools Questionnaire Composite* (Westchester, IL: Independent Fundamental Churches of America, 1986).

Dr. North has highly recommended David Chilton's book, *The Days of Vengeance--An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, as the key work on prophecy and North himself wrote the preface. He states that no one has and no one can write a better commentary on Revelation, so it is not unreasonable to assume that Gary North would be in agreement with Chilton's position on Revelation 20. Here is Chilton's non-literal understanding of the thousand years: The thousand years represent "a vast, undefined period of time....It has already lasted almost 2,000 years, and will probably go on for many more. The thousand years is to be understood as a symbolical number, denoting a long period...It may require a million years."¹²

Dr. North is totally opposed to the evolutionary theory, and yet he handles Revelation 20 in a way very similar to how the evolutionists handle Genesis 1. The evolutionists say:

Evolution is really impossible, but if you give us enough time, all things are possible. We don't need God; we just need time. Even though we cannot see evolution taking place today, if you give us enough time then anything can happen.¹³ Thus we cannot take the days of Genesis 1 literally because we need much more time than six days. We need millions and millions of years. Without that much time our evolutionary theory is in great trouble!

Reconstructionists echo the thinking of the evolutionists in their approach to Revelation chapter 20:

Reconstructing society according to Biblical law seems impossible, but if we have enough time it can be done. We certainly don't see it taking place today. In fact, it seems as though society is becoming more and more lawless. But with enough time these changes for the better will come. We don't need Christ's personal coming to this earth to change society. We can do it but we need time. If you give us enough time anything can happen. Thus we cannot take the thousand years of Revelation 20 literally because we need much more time than that. We need thousands and thousands of years, perhaps EVEN A MILLION YEARS for us to overcome and have dominion over the earth. But be patient. It will happen! But without that much time our reconstruction/postmillennial theory is in great trouble!

¹² David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance--An Exposition of the Book of Revelation* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 507. Dr. North's preface is found on pages xv-xxxiii.

¹³ This is beautifully illustrated by a statement made by evolutionist Rick Gore, in an article entitled, "The Awesome Worlds Within a Cell," which appeared in *National Geographic* in September 1976. In discussing how the first living cell originated, Gore said, "The odds against the right molecules being in the right place at the right time are staggering. Yet, as science measures it, so is the time scale on which nature works. Indeed, what seems an impossible occurrence at any one moment would, given untold eons, become a certainty" (390). In other words, evolutionists teach that "With time, all things are possible!"

We can be thankful for a great Creator God who was able to make the heavens and the earth in six literal days! And we can be thankful for a great coming King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who can suddenly and mightily bring in His promised kingdom (Daniel 2:44). He is not dependent upon man's feeble efforts at improving society. All man can do is make society more and more corrupt, even as it was in the days of Noah!

Test #4—The Three and A Half Years of Daniel and Revelation

Do I understand the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation to be describing a period of three and a half literal years?

In God's prophetic masterpieces of Daniel and Revelation, there is a period of time that is said to be three and a half years. It is described in four different ways:

- 1) Twelve hundred and sixty (1260) days (Revelation 12:6,14). This would be equivalent to 3½ years and also equivalent to 42 months (each month having 30 days).
- 2) Forty-two (42) months (Revelation 11:2; 13:5).
- 3) "A time, times, and half a time" (Daniel 12:7; Rev. 12:14)--if a "time" equals a year and if "times" equals two years, then "a time, times and half a time" would equal 3½ years.
- 4) Half of a week with the week consisting of seven years, hence a 3½ year period (Daniel 9:27).

God means what He says and says what He means! He has told us about a period of time which is equal to three and a half years, and He describes this period of time in four different ways to make sure we understand! When God says 1,260 days does He really mean 1,260 days? When God says 42 months, does he really mean 42 months? When God says 3½ years [time (1) + times (2) + half a time (½) = 3½], does He really mean 3½ years? When God speaks of half of a seven year period (Daniel 9:27), does He really mean half of a seven year period?

Can we give God some credit that He certainly knows how to count?

Test #5—Animal Sacrifices and the Millennial Temple

Do I understand that there will be animal sacrifices in the future, during the kingdom age?

Do I believe in a future millennial temple exactly as described in the closing chapters of Ezekiel?

Those who do not believe in a literal, earthly, millennial kingdom have a major problem believing that there will be animal sacrifices reinstated under a Zadokian priesthood during the coming kingdom age. They cannot understand how this can be reconciled with the once-for-all, forever sacrifice of our perfect Substitute, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet we cannot ignore very clear passages which speak about future animal sacrifices in the context of a future millennial temple. See Ezekiel 40-48 (especially 43:19-27); Isaiah 56:6-7; Isaiah 60:7; Zechariah 14:16-21. To spiritualize these prophecies is to empty them of their literal content. To pretend that they somehow apply to the church of this present age is an insult to the God who expects us to take Him at His Word. Actually many non-dispensationalists simply ignore these prophecies which is easier than trying to explain them away.

The same non-literal approach is often taken with respect to the millennial temple with its detailed description given to us in Ezekiel chapters 40-48. And yet these same men would tell us that the detailed description of the tabernacle and its furniture as found in the book of Exodus or the detailed description of Solomon's temple in 1 Kings 6 should be taken very literally. Why do we understand the detailed descriptions of the tabernacle and temple to be descriptive of literal structures, but when it comes to a future temple, also described in great detail, we abandon a literal understanding of the Word of God? Could it be that our hermeneutics is governed by our theology? If a person does not believe in a future, earthly kingdom centered in Jerusalem, then it is easy to understand why he would not believe that there would be a temple there either, much less animal sacrifices!¹⁴

¹⁴ For further study: John C. Whitcomb, "The Millennial Temple of Ezekiel 40-48—An Exercise in Literal Interpretation," *The Diligent Workman*, Volume 2, Issue 1, May 1994 and Charles Lee Feinberg, *The Prophecy of Ezekiel: The Glory of the Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 233-279.

Test #6—The Millennial River Originating in Jerusalem

Do I believe in a millennial river beginning at the Jerusalem temple and flowing into both the Dead Sea (which will then be a living sea) and the Mediterranean Sea?

Another test for literal interpretation is the river which is described in Ezekiel 47 and in other places in the Old Testament. This amazing river will originate from the house of the LORD (compare Joel 3:18) as a very shallow stream. Gradually the stream will get deeper and fuller until it is over a man's head. It eventually travels east until it empties into the Dead Sea which will then be a terrible misnomer because the waters of the Dead Sea will be turned into fresh water teeming with fish (see Ezekiel 47:1-10). The Dead Sea will be miraculously transformed into a living sea!

In Zechariah 14:8 we learn that half of this river will empty into the Dead Sea and half of the river will empty into the Mediterranean Sea. This river is also mentioned in Psalm 46:4 (and notice the context in Psalm 46:9-10 which clearly speaks of the kingdom).

The descriptions of this river are as literal as literal can be. There are clear geographical references made in connection with this river (Ezek. 47:8-10). There are exact distances and depths measured out (Ezek. 47:3-5). The details concerning this river are very descriptive and specific. It flows into the sea (the Dead Sea) and the waters, which once were the saltiest on earth, become fresh. There will be many varieties of fish in this same body of water where fish formerly could never live. Fishermen will stand beside it and there will be the spreading of nets. Are we to reject this whole description and spiritualize it and give it some strange meaning according to our own fancy, or should we take it at face value and give the words their literal and normal and obvious sense?

When people depart from a literal interpretation they deny the plain sense and they give the text some other sense according to their own lively imagination. It is almost humorous to read the commentaries and see how people spiritualize this river and make it mean whatever they want it to mean.

The early church fathers saw the river as a symbol of baptism. Some see it as the stream of church history. Many speak of the river as emblematic of spiritual life, with some saints only ankle-deep or knee-deep Christians. Others identify the river with the stream of the Gospel, denying any literal future aspect of the prophecy. Derek Kidner, in relating the river with the river of paradise in

Genesis 2, speaks of it simply as "vitality that flows from holy ground," whatever that might mean.¹⁵

The river is directly connected to the house of the LORD (Ezek. 47:1-2; Joel 3:18), so if a person rejects the literalness of this river he must also reject the literalness of the temple which is described in Ezekiel chapters 40-48. Actually the three (the temple, the river and the animal sacrifices) must stand or fall together.

Alva McClain, whose work on the kingdom is classic, has written the following about the millennial river issuing from the temple:

In addition to these natural results which must follow properly controlled rainfall, there may also be streams continually flowing by *miraculous* causation, such as the marvelous stream pictured by Ezekiel (47:1-12). Its issue from the temple, its immense size, the beneficial qualities of its fruit, its perennial flow "in summer and in winter" (Zech. 14:8)--all emphasize the supernatural nature of the stream. There is nothing at all inherently impossible in such a phenomenon. Why should anyone stumble at the idea of a beautiful stream springing up at the geographical center of our Lord's blessed Kingdom on earth, with healing in both its waters and the fruit which grows beside it? Is there anything incredible here, if we remember that the coming King is the One who once turned water into wine and sent the sightless man to wash away his blindness in the waters of Siloam (John 9:11)? What a visible symbol this will be to remind the nations of the unending blessings which will flow from the throne of the Son of David! And from *this* shrine none will go away in heartbreaking disappointment because no help has been found.¹⁶

I wrote to Gary DeMar, well known preterist author and a leading critic of dispensationalism.¹⁷ The question I asked him was simply this:

Ezekiel 47 and other passages teach that there will be a river flowing from the temple, emptying into the Dead Sea, with the result that the waters of the Dead Sea will be healed so that fish will live there and fishermen will fish there (verses 1-10). When was this fulfilled?

¹⁵ Manfred E. Kober, "The Return of the Lord and the River of Life," in *Basic Theology: Applied*, editors Wesley & Elaine Willis, John & Janet Master (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 289.

¹⁶ Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom--An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1974) 237.

¹⁷ His attack on dispensationalism is called *Last Days Madness--Obsession of the Modern Church* (Atlanta: American Vision, 1999).

His answer was lengthy, but the essence of it was that this passage in Ezekiel 47 has already been fulfilled by Jesus Christ who is our River of Life.¹⁸ Now we would certainly agree that Jesus Christ is our River of Life, and we would still be dead in sins apart from Him who is our Life, but does this mean that the clear statements about the river in Ezekiel 47 (and how the waters of the Dead Sea will be healed) will never find literal fulfillment? The key question really is this: Is God going to do what He said He would do in Ezekiel 47, or not? To simply say that all of the details and specific statements of this prophecy were fulfilled by Jesus Christ does not do justice to the clear statements of Scripture. It does not honor Christ to deny the plain and obvious and natural sense of His Word. The waters of the Dead Sea were never healed at Christ's first coming and during the last 2000 years no fishermen have been spreading their nets there. Ezekiel's prophecy has never been fulfilled, but those who take God at His Word know that it will be.

Test #7—The Extent of the Atonement

Do I understand that Christ died for all men and that He tasted death for every man without exception?

The language of the Bible cannot be clearer:

He died for . . .

the world (John 3:16; 6:33,51)
the whole world (1 John 2:2)
all (1 Timothy 2:6)
us all (Isaiah 53:6)
all men (Romans 5:18)
every man (Hebrews 2:9)
Christ-deniers (2 Peter 2:1).

Does God really mean what He says? Can we take Him at His Word? Or, are we going to let our theology force us to change the meaning of words that by themselves are very clear?

Sir Robert Anderson, in the preface of his book *Forgotten Truths*, has written the following:

In the early years of my Christian life I was greatly perplexed and distressed by the supposition that the plain and simple words of such Scriptures as John 3:16; 1 John 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:6 were not true, save in a cryptic sense understood only by the initiated. For, I was told, the over-shadowing truth of Divine sovereignty in election barred our taking them literally. But half a century ago a friend of those days—the late Dr. Horatius Bonar—delivered me from this strangely prevalent error. He taught me that truths may seem to us irreconcilable

¹⁸ This is the typical answer of a preterist: "It is **fulfilled**, not **future**!"

only because our finite minds cannot understand the Infinite; and we must never allow our faulty apprehension of the eternal counsels of God to hinder unquestioning faith in the words of Holy Scripture.¹⁹

Richard Baxter (1615-1691) was a godly saint who is highly esteemed among Reformed men. He wrote the following about this very matter:

When God telleth us as plain as can be spoken, that Christ died for and tasted death for every man, men will deny it, and to that end subvert the plain sense of the words, merely because they cannot see how this can stand with Christ's damning men, and with his special Love to his chosen. It is not hard to see the fair and harmonious consistency: But what if you cannot see how two plain Truths of the Gospel should agree? Will you therefore deny one of them when both are plain? Is not that in high pride to prefer your own understandings before the wisdom of the Spirit of God, who indicted the Scriptures? Should not a humble man rather say, doubtless both are true though I cannot reconcile them. So others will deny these plain truths, because they think that all that Christ died for are certainly Justified and Saved: For whomsoever he died and satisfied Justice for, them he procured Faith to Believe in him: God cannot justly punish those whom Christ hath satisfied for, etc. But doth the Scripture speak all these or any of these opinions of theirs, as plainly as it saith that Christ died for all and every man? Doth it say, as plainly any where that he died not for all? Doth it any where except any one man, and say Christ died not for him? Doth it say any where that he died *only* for his Sheep, or his Elect, and exclude the Non-Elect? There is no such word in all the Bible; Should not then the certain truths and the plain texts be the Standard to the uncertain points, and obscure texts?²⁰

Richard Baxter then skillfully applied these principles to the case at hand:

Now I would know of any man, would you believe that Christ died for all men if the Scripture plainly speak it? If you would, do but tell me, what words can you devise or would you wish more plain for it than are there used? Is it not enough that Christ is called the Saviour of the World? You'll say, but is it of the whole World? Yes, it saith, He is the propitiation for the sins of the whole World. Will you say, but it is not for All men in the World? Yes it saith he died for all men, as well as for all the World. But will you say, it saith not for every man? Yes it

¹⁹ Sir Robert Anderson, *Forgotten Truths* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1980), preface, xi-xii.

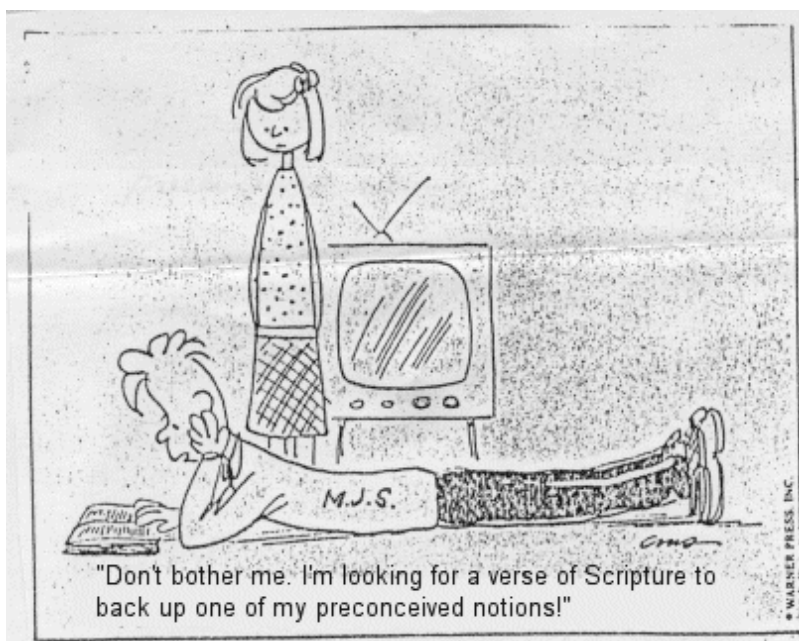
²⁰ Richard Baxter, *Universal Redemption of Mankind by the Lord Jesus Christ* (London: Printed for John Salusbury at the Rising Sun in Cornhill, 1694) 282-283, the archaic spelling of the original has been conformed to current English usage for the purpose of ease of reading.

doth say, he tasted death for every man. But you may say, It means all the Elect, if it said so of any Non-Elect I would believe. Yes, it speaks of those that denied the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And yet all this seems nothing to men prejudiced.²¹

I knew of a man who was not committed to the belief that Christ died for all men and yet he made this remarkable concession: "If Christ really did die for all men, then I don't know how the Bible could say it any clearer than it does." How true! This same man later embraced the doctrine of unlimited atonement because he could not deny the literal force of the clear and plain statements of Scripture.²²

Seven Tests—How did you do?

Did you approach all seven examples from a consistent literal viewpoint, seeking to understand the language of the Bible in a natural and normal way, understanding the language in its obvious sense? May God help us to come to His Word in simple childlike faith and humbly take Him at His Word, letting the Bible say what it says, and not forcing it to say what we want it to say or think it should say! "Speak Lord, for Thy servant heareth" (1 Sam. 3:9).



²¹ Ibid., 286-287. The verses that are alluded to in this quote are John 4:42; 1 John 2:2; 1 Tim. 2:4-6; Heb. 2:9; 2 Pet. 2:1).

²² For further study: A detailed defense of the doctrine of Unlimited Atonement is available upon request from the Middletown Bible Church, 349 East St., Middletown, CT 06457.