

## AVOIDING BIBLE DIFFICULTIES

### I. RESOURCES

- A. *When Critics Ask: A Popular Handbook of Bible Difficulties*  
Norman L. Geisler, Thomas A. Howe [*Most points following are from this work*]
  
- B. *Difficulties in the Bible*  
R.A. Torrey
  
- C. *Study Like a Pro: Explore Difficult Passages from Every Book of the Bible*  
John D. Barry, Rebecca van Noord
  
- D. *Can I Trust the Bible*  
R.C. Sproul

### II. TYPICAL CAUSES BEHIND SUPPOSED DIFFICULTIES

- A. Assuming there really is no explanation for what is not explainable
  - 1. Many scientists have been baffled by what appeared to be unexplainable
    - a. Bumblebee supposedly couldn't fly by physics constraints
      - 1). False based on incorrect comparison to aircraft wings
        - a.) Insects wings operate more like a helicopter's blade
    - b. Scientists have learned to continue to research until they find the explanation
  
  - 2. Related to the Bible
    - a. Critics used to say that Moses couldn't have written the Pentateuch because there was no form of writing in his day
      - 1). Later found that formal writing existed a few thousand years before
  
    - b. Uriah the Hittite ? But the Hittites never existed was the claim by historians
      - 1). Their library was found in Turkey
  
  - 3. Diligent and patient research is necessary to understand Biblical dilemmas
  
- B. Assuming that the Bible is wrong until it is proven right
  - 1. Would you routinely disbelieve what the authors saw and heard for other non-fiction books ?
  - 2. Approaching structured criticism of the Bible in this way easily leads to assumption of falsehoods

C. Forgetting that God's revelations are infallible, our interpretations are not

1. Jesus speaking on the infallible Word

a. In John 10.35

"If he called them gods, to whom the word of God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken) ...."

b. And in Matt 5.18

"For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished."

2. The Bible is infallible, and the reader must approach it that way

a. We should not accept the prevailing view over the Bible's infallibility

1). Truth is not determined by a majority vote

b. Example: Supposed conflict between science and the Bible

1). The Bible is accurate when commenting on scientific matters

2). The Bible has repeatedly been vindicated when science searches further, and new facts are known

D. Not heeding the context of the passage in supposed difficulty

1. "A text out of context is a pretext."

2. Examples

a. Example from Ps 1

1). Critic might quote "There is no God"

2). In context, the verse reads

" The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' "

b. Example from Matt 5.39

1). "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person... "

a.) Is Jesus really telling us to not resist those who do evil ?

2). Note the full context of the verse

a.) "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also"

b.) The statement about an evil person is made in the context of telling us to not react in retaliation

E. Failure to interpret a difficult passage in the light of clear passages

1. Common difficulties

- a. The passage may be obscure in meaning
- b. The passage may appear to be teach

2. Example # 1 of salvation through works versus grace

a. James 2.14-26 appears to be saying that salvation is by works

14 What use is it, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but he has no works? Can that faith save him? ....

17 Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.

20 But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?

24 You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.

26 For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.

b. But Paul says that salvation is by grace alone

Rom 4.5

5 But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness

Titus 3.5-7

5 He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit,

6 whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, according to the hope of eternal life.

Eph 2.8-9

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;

9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

c. How do we resolve this ?

1). Don't assume there is opposition from the start

2). How could both passages be true ?

a.) Paul refers to justification in front of God

b.) James is referring to justification before men

3. Example # 2 of salvation through works versus grace

- a. Phil 2.12 seems to say you must work for your salvation

12 So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling

- b. But the passages we gave from Paul show that this can't be true

- c. So what's the answer >> CONTEXT

- 1). Phil 2.13

13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure

- 2). God works in His believers' hearts to produce the works He wants to affect others

- a.) Warren Wiersbe explained this as

"God must work in us before He can work through us"

- b.) Dallas Theological Seminary's *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* states it as

"God makes His own both willing and desirous to do His work.

F. Basing understanding on an obscure passage

1. Case # 1: A key word's meaning is unclear

- a. Lord's Prayer: 6.11

11 Give us this day our daily bread

b. Word translated "daily" Gk *epiousios*

- 1). Appears nowhere else in Greek literature until this was written  
2). Some possible meanings from Greek scholars

Give us this day our continuous bread.

Give us this day our supersubstantial (indicating supernatural, from heaven) bread.

Give us this day bread for our sustenance.

Give us this day our daily (or, what we need for today) bread.

- 3). None give any reason to depart from the common understanding of literally bread for each day

- c. Bottom line .. sometimes research has to stop and you accept what the Spirit gives you in understanding

- 1). i.e. in this example, it is not a doctrinal issue

2. Case # 2: Words are clear, but what they refer to isn't

a. 1 Cor 15.29

29 Otherwise, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why then are they baptized for them?

b. Some possible explanations for what Paul is saying

- 1). Baptizing of live representatives to ensure salvation for dead believers who were not baptized, e.g. Mormon beliefs
- 2). Others being baptized into the church to fill the ranks of those who have passed on
- 3). A believer being baptized "for" (i.e., "with a view to") his own death and burial with Christ

3. Some guidelines to interpretation in such a case

a. Don't build Bible doctrine on an obscure passage

"the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things."

- 1). Important Biblical truths are stated clearly, and often in more than one place
- b. If a passage is unclear, don't assume that it contradicts other Biblical passages that are clear

G. Remember the Bible was written by humans exhibiting human characteristics

1. Including that God is writing to humans who He apparently thinks understand best by being addressed in human terms and examples

2. Approximately 40 different writers

- a. Differing styles
- b. Writing idiosyncrasies
- c. Human perspectives, observer's viewpoint
- d. Human thought patterns
- e. However, all under the direction of the Holy Spirit
  - 1). God's truth in multiple ways

3. Resulting different styles to interpret

- a. Lamentations - mournful
- b. Isaiah - soaring poetry
- c. Psalm 23 - a shepherd's perspective
- d. Kings - a prophetic viewpoint
- e. Chronicles - a priestly viewpoint
- f. Luke - a medical concern
- g. John - a strong message in simple grammar
- h. Hebrews - complex Greek
- i. James - love of nature

4. Don't fault a passage by expecting more than the particular author would ordinarily express

H. Assuming that what appears as a partial report is a false report

1. When have you ever seen a complete report on something ?

- a. Usually, new information comes out
- b. It might be additional facts, or the same facts given from a different viewpoint

2. Example

- a. The Gospels relate the same story from four different viewpoints
- b. Note their treatment of Peter's confession of Who Christ is, and how each has common, and different, information:

Matt 16.16:

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Mark 8.29:

Peter \*answered and \*said to Him, "You are the Christ."

Luke 9.20:

Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God."

3. Examples of other Biblical differences with varying information

- a. The Ten Commandments vary in information between Exodus & Deuteronomy

1). Example: 4th Commandment given in Exodus 20.8-11

8 "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9 "Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

10 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you.

11 "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

versus its restatement in Deut 5.12-15

12 'Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you.

13 'Six days you shall labor and do all your work,

14 but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you.

15 'You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

b. Historical information from David and Solomon's times

- 1). Kings gives the basic information
- 2). Chronicles fills in some added details

4. Summary: Avoid concluding a passage with apparently partial information is a false passage

I. Assuming that a NT "inexact" quote of an OT passage is an inaccuracy

1. These instances are no different from literacy style of centuries

- a. Authors and readers recognized that you can't give the essence of a statement without using the same words

2. Some causes of the variations

a. The speakers of the same statement are different

Zechariah quoted the Lord in Zech 12.10

"...they will look on Me whom they have pierced..."

John, in restating Zech 12.10 in John 19.37 says

And again another Scripture says,

"THEY SHALL LOOK ON HIM WHOM THEY PIERCED."

b. Some NT speakers quote only a part of the OT text

1). In Lk 4.18-19, Jesus quoted from Isaiah 61.1-2 in the Nazareth synagogue

18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,  
BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL  
TO THE POOR.  
HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE  
CAPTIVES,  
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,  
TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,  
19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."

2). But He stopped in the middle of Isa 61.2

2 To proclaim the favorable year of the LORD  
And the day of vengeance of our God;  
To comfort all who mourn,

a.) The reference to vengeance is to His Second Coming !

c. Some NT writers state a general truth without citing a reference

Matt 2.23

"... and came and lived in a city called Nazareth. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophets: 'He shall be called a Nazarene.' "

1). Who are the prophets that so spoke ? Matthew does not cite them

J. Assuming that differing descriptions of the same event are false

1. How many angels were at the tomb of Jesus ??

Matt 28.5 "The angel said to the women..." - One ?

John 20.12 "...she \*saw two angels in white sitting..." - Or two ?

- a. Matthew did not say "only one"
- b. Where there are two, there is one

2. How did Judas die ??

Matt 27.5 "...he went away and hanged himself."

Luke says in Acts 1.18 "...falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out."

- a. Not said where he hung himself
- b. If on a tree over a cliff, and he fell to rocks below, both would be true

K. Assuming that the Bible approves of all it records

1. It records lies, as well as truths spoken

Rahab in Joshua 2.4

"But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them, and she said, 'Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from.' "

2. It records human conditions that a sinful, but does not uphold them

- a. David's sin with Bathsheba
- b. Solomon's polygamy
- c. Atheism

Psalm 14.1 "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' "

L. Assuming general statements have no exceptions

1. Proverbs gives many general truths to live by, but not guaranteed to have no exceptions

a. Prov 16.7

When a man's ways are pleasing to the LORD,  
He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him

- 1). Paul pleased the Lord but was stoned almost to death
- 2). Jesus pleased the Father, but was tortured and crucified

b. Prov 22.6

Train up a child in the way he should go,  
Even when he is old he will not depart from it

- 1). How about Job's kids ? Eli the high priests sons ?

M. Assuming that the Bible copies are inerrant

1. Example re. King Ahaziah's age when he became king

2 Kings 8.26 "Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he became king"

2 Chron 22.2 "Ahaziah was forty-two years old when he began to reign"  
(NRSV)

- a. If Ahaziah was 42, he would have been older than his father
- b. Most translations have been corrected to what is likely what the original verse said

2. Guidelines about copyist errors

a. There are errors in the copies, not in the original

- 1). No one has found an original with an error in it
- b. They are minor errors not affecting Christian doctrine
- c. There are relatively few
- d. The error can usually be detected by their context, and/or other related passages
- e. Multiple copies of the same passage can be compared to determine the error and solution