

UNRAVELLING DIFFICULT VERSES

PREFACE

I am very grateful to Ben Tannett for the work he has put in to produce this book and a number of talks on the same subjects for the “Serving Today” radio programme designed to help pastors and church leaders. It has been a pleasure to work with Ben and to benefit from his ministry.

It is almost inevitable with a book of this nature that there will be new ways of understanding the passages of the Bible under consideration. Indeed, there may be times when you want to take a different viewpoint from that of the author. If that happens I would like to say two things.

First, remember that Ben has committed to writing the result of his extended and prayerful study of the Scriptures. He has not come to the particular interpretation he gives in these pages suddenly or lightly, but after careful and diligent work, often studying the original Hebrew and Greek text of the Bible.

Second, we want you to feel you can write to us and to enter into discussion so that we can grow together in our understanding of the Word of God. You will be familiar with the words of Proverbs 27:17 “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.” And that sums up our aim in both this book and the “Serving Today” radio programme. We want to be of mutual help to one another as we seek to work for our Saviour as his servants.

May the Lord who inspired the Scriptures by his Spirit also be our teacher, deepening our appreciation of his Word and making us better ministers of the new covenant.

Derek French

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone who has repented of their sin, and put their trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, should want to study the Bible. Jesus said (John 10:27), “My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me.” The aim of this book is to help us to listen to Jesus’ voice, in order to follow Him, and to help others to do the same. It is particularly aimed at those who seek to be “*a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Our task is often difficult, because the Bible contains many passages which are hard to understand. It is comforting to know that even Peter found this. He wrote that Paul’s “*...letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures...*” (2 Peter 3:16). This book contains brief studies of some of the “hardest” passages of the Bible. Some were suggested by listeners to the “Serving Today” and “Sound Words” radio programmes. Others were chosen because they are often misunderstood, or distorted.

The Holy Spirit wrote the Bible, using the human authors. They could not have written it without the Spirit, and we cannot understand it without the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14): *“...the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God...he cannot understand them, for they are spiritually discerned.”* You must become a Christian before you can understand the Bible. And before a Christian studies the Bible, we should ask the Holy Spirit to give us discernment.

But this promise of God-given discernment does not mean we do not need to work at understanding the Bible. Like many other things in the Christian life, God rewards our “sanctified effort”. Paul said to Timothy (2 Timothy 2:7): *“Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.”* Paul was “saying” the words of the Bible. So I want to claim that same promise for you and for me. We will put in the effort of study, to “reflect” upon the Bible, and we ask God to give us insight into its interpretation.

The studies which follow aim to give the simplest and most straightforward explanation of each passage, together with some brief applications. My approach to interpretation has been guided by these four great biblical truths about God:

God is Infinite

He says (Isaiah 55:9), *“As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* There will therefore be many things in the Bible which we will not be able to understand. There will even be times when the teaching of one part of the Bible appears to contradict another. This

creates “problems” for us, but is of course no problem to God, who is infinitely wise.

God is Sovereign

He is completely in control of everything in the universe (Matthew 10:29). God is perfectly able to communicate with us through the Bible. He is perfectly able to make us understand everything in it that He wants us to (Isaiah 55:11). All Christians ought to agree about what the Bible teaches (1 Corinthians 1:10), but sadly we don’t always. We should not be afraid to stand for the truth, even when fellow Christians disagree (Galatians 2:11-14). But we must be cautious if we have arrived at an unusual interpretation, which goes against what most other Christians believe.

God is Love

God blesses us when we correctly understand and obey His Word. God gives us His Word to make us “...thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy. 3:17). God conforms us to the likeness of Christ, as we obey His Word. It is always possible that we may draw a faulty application from a correct interpretation. But if the clear application anyone would draw from our interpretation would lead us into evil, then our interpretation must be wrong (James 1:13).

God is not a God of disorder (1 Corinthians 14:33)

The Bible is not always a neat and logical book by our human standards. But if we look carefully throughout its pages we can see God working out His wonderful plan to save a people for Himself through Christ. Hard passages

can often be explained by reference to this “big picture” of how God orders all the people and events of history towards His great purpose. Hard passages often become easier when we see them in this full biblical context.

In offering some applications from the text, at the end of each chapter, I have been guided by the principle that “a record is not necessarily a rule”. The record in the Bible that God acted in one way at one time, does not necessarily make it a rule He will always act in this way. The record of how people have acted in particular Bible passages does not necessarily set a rule that we should imitate them. The Bible gives us the record of bad examples to avoid as well as good examples to imitate. This is an important principle to bear in mind, as you work out the applications of any passage for your own situation, and that of your hearers.

May God bless you as you labour in His Word for Him.

Ben Tannett

Chapter 1 Where did Cain’s wife come from? (Genesis 4:16-17)

The world of the first men and women, before the flood, was very different from the one we know today. That means there is much about the first eleven chapters of Genesis that strikes us as odd. One of the strangest things is that the people lived to enormous ages – Adam to the age of 930.

Most people today, including sadly, many Christians, think that these sorts of ages are completely unbelievable. They cannot accept there ever was such a person as Cain, or

Adam, or any of the other people we read about in the early chapters of Genesis. They would say that this is all a myth. It’s a story told to explain why we got here, but it’s not a true account of how we got here.

I do not believe that Genesis is a myth. I believe it presents us with the historical facts. One of the questions I can therefore expect to be asked is, where did Cain get his wife from? We read in Genesis 4:17 that he had a wife, but we are not told where she came from.

My answer would be to look on to Genesis 5:4, where we read that Adam and Eve “*had other sons and daughters*”. We’re not told when they had these daughters. Some were clearly born some years after the events of Genesis 4:17, after Seth had been born. But, if Genesis 5:4 is not in strict chronological order, they might have already had at least one daughter by the time of Genesis 4:17.

This however raises the question, ‘Is not that incest?’ Yes, it was, strictly speaking. And we need to note that the Bible makes it perfectly clear to us that a brother and sister should not be married together. But, for Cain, and those first men on earth, incest like this was not yet a sin – indeed it was their only option – they had to marry their sisters; there were no other women. There was only Adam’s family on the earth.

Once there were more generations of people on earth and it was no longer necessary to marry your sister or brother, it would become a sin to do so. But back at the beginning, it was acceptable for Cain to marry his sister.

What about the risk of genetic defects in the children? How could Adam and Eve have continued to have children when they were well over 130 years old? How could people have lived to such enormous ages as are recorded here in Genesis? Cain lived long enough to have needed to build a city (4:17), and there are many other indications here that the population of earth grew very rapidly.

My answer would be that, before the flood had radically changed the climate of the whole earth, and before the effects of sin had done their worst in bringing death to us all, men, who God had originally intended to live forever, could live for eight or nine hundred years. And they could continue having children when they were already hundreds of years old.

It is a bit like making a copy of a videotape. The first copy from the original is quite watchable – the picture is still quite sharp, and the sound is clear. But if you copy that copy, and then copy that copy, you will soon find you can hardly make out what the picture is, it is so fuzzy, and the sound becomes so muffled, you cannot hear it clearly. This was how it was with mankind. As the generations continued after Adam, and especially after the flood, people began to have life spans more like our own today, and stopped being able to have children in their old age.

But in Cain's day people did live for hundreds of years. And they could continue to have children when they were well over a hundred years old. There was something radically different about their DNA and genetic makeup that meant children born of incest did not suffer from genetic abnormalities. Just as the first copy off a videotape

is quite OK, the picture is still clear, and the sound sharp, so I believe God protected these first and second “copies” of mankind from genetic defects. Conditions in the first years of man's existence were very different from what they are today.

Application

There is no application from this which would allow incest today. However, perhaps the greatest lesson from a study of Genesis 4 is to remind us that God has plans for a new world to come, that will be infinitely better, even than the world that existed before the Fall. In this world, people will live forever (you can read more about this new world in the last chapter).

Chapter 2 Who are the “sons of God” and “daughters of men” in Genesis 6:4?

Some people have seized upon these verses as evidence for aliens from outer space having sexual intercourse with earth women. But I do not think “sons of God” here can mean aliens, not least because I am not sure that God has created intelligent life on any other planets.

Others have seen these verses as lending biblical support to the ancient Greek myths, which include tales of the gods having sexual intercourse with human beings. But in Romans 1 Paul says these sorts of religious ideas are lies created by those who refuse to acknowledge the truth. So it would be odd if Genesis 6 supported them.

Still others have seen Genesis 6 as evidence of demons having sexual relations with women. This was a constant

concern of those who conducted the witch hunts in Europe during previous centuries. But demons are fallen angels, and passages like Luke 20:34ff tell us that angels do not have the capacity for sexual intercourse with humans.

So, I think there is probably a far more “down to earth” explanation to these verses. It is all to do with what God was to say to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, “*I will make you into a great nation...*” The Old Testament is about this promise God made. In particular, it is about a line of inheritance that stretches all the way from Adam, through Abraham, and down to Jesus Christ.

In Luke 3, Luke gives the genealogy, or family tree of Jesus. Jesus was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph (Luke 3:23). Luke then traces Jesus’ line all the way back through history, through David, and through Abraham, until he gets to Adam, “*the son of God*” (Luke 3:38). Now in the Greek, the word “son” is not actually there; it appears once, at the beginning of the genealogy, and has to be understood as applying to all the sons going up the list to Adam. But, nevertheless, it is still biblical language to consider Jesus’ genealogy as being the line of the sons of God.

Jesus’ line is the line through which, right from the outset, before God gave that promise to Abraham, God planned to bless the world. That blessing has now come – through Jesus. I think Genesis 6 refers to the people in this line as “the sons of God”.

Genesis has already told us quite a lot about the sons of God, the people in this line. At the time of Seth and Enosh men began to call on the name of the Lord. Enoch was a

man who walked with God. It appears that the men in line of the sons of God were godly men. But as Genesis 6 opens, things have taken a turn for the worse. The population has increased rapidly, and the inclination of men’s hearts had become evil all the time.

This might be one thing, if the evil men kept separate from the men in the line of God’s promise, and the sons of God continued being godly, like Enoch. But verse 2 tells us that the men in God’s line found the daughters of these evil men attractive and married them.

Whenever you read something like this in the Old Testament you know it spells danger. Over and over again, God’s line, God’s people, are led into idolatry and the worship of foreign gods, through marrying ungodly women.

So I think the sons of God are those in the line of Adam, which will lead through Abraham to Christ, whereas the sons of men were of another line – a line that no longer exists; it was wiped out in the flood.

Application

We are not interested in who belongs to any particular line today. Even if anyone could trace their ancestry back to Abraham, it would not guarantee them salvation. That is because the gospel promises salvation to whoever will trust in Jesus Christ, regardless of their family line, or nation. We rejoice that in John 1:12-13 the “*sons of God*” today are not those who are sons by birth, by family line, but by adoption. Romans 8:19 talks of the creation waiting for these sons “*to be revealed*”.

The warning of the flood is also another application of Genesis 6. God wiped out an entire world of sinful people. If anyone today will not come to Jesus, to be adopted into His family, then they will have to face God's wrath on Judgment Day.

Chapter 3 Who is the man with the drawn sword in Joshua 5:13-6:2?

We find very similar accounts to this one in Joshua 5 throughout the Old Testament. A man appears to one of God's people, and speaks to them. But we soon realise that it is an extraordinary man – it is none other than God, or an angel – appearing in human form. An extraordinary man appeared and spoke like this to Abraham and to Jacob, amongst others, as well as to Joshua.

People can be very concerned to find out exactly who men like this one were. Were they angels in human form? Was this Jesus Christ Himself, in some sort of pre-incarnate form? Was this God the Father, temporarily taking on the appearance of a man? We do not know.

We can say that all these appearances fall short of being an appearance of God *incarnate* in the way that Jesus was incarnate amongst us. These men appeared suddenly, and disappeared suddenly, once they had delivered their message. Unlike Jesus they were not born as babies, they did not live a normal life on earth, deliver their message, and then die and rise again. Therefore many of these appearances are best described as 'theophanies'. That means they are an *appearing* of God in human form, for a

short time, for a special purpose – to deliver a message to man.

Now at first sight the message delivered by this man in Joshua 5 is very short. All he says is that he is the commander of the army of the LORD and that the ground he stands on is holy. God was to reveal His army to Elisha, in 2 Kings 6, when the people of God were besieged by the Arameans. When Elisha saw it, he said in verse 16, "*Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.*" God did not reveal his army to Joshua visibly, but by having its commander appear to him with this short message, God encouraged Joshua. He would soon have to lead the people of God into battle against the city of Jericho. The people of God could not enter into the Promised Land until that heavily fortified city had been defeated. But the man tells Joshua that he would have all God's mighty power on his side.

But I wonder if this man didn't say a bit more to Joshua. If you look on to chapter 6 verse 2 you read that, "*The Lord said to Joshua, 'See I have delivered Jericho into your hands...'*" and He went on to tell Joshua how to capture it. Did God speak through this extraordinary man, with the drawn sword? The Old Testament sometimes says, "*The Lord said...*" when it's actually an angel who is speaking at the time. In other words, if the Lord's messenger brings His word faithfully, then it is as if God Himself has spoken.

The writer to the Hebrews says that God did speak "in various ways" in the Old Testament. Sometimes He appeared in human form, sometimes He sent an angel to

speak for Him. On one occasion He wrote with His own finger on tablets of stone, and on another occasion He wrote by hand on King Belshazzar's wall. But, in every case what mattered was not the WAY in which God chose to speak, but WHAT God said.

And the writer to the Hebrews reminds us that the greatest way in which God has spoken was when Jesus Christ came (Hebrews 1:1-2). Jesus said to Philip, "*Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father*" (John 14:9). Jesus is God made man, God incarnate. It wasn't that Jesus just *looked* like a man, "incarnate" means that Jesus actually *is* a man. His words are the very words of God.

Application

We must not become so fascinated with the messengers God may use, that we overlook His message. So I do not think we should worry too much about who the man with the sword in Joshua 5 is. But what should encourage us is that, if we are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, then, as Psalm 34 says, "*The Angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them.*" We know this is true because God has told us this in the way He normally speaks to us, through the Bible.

Chapter 4 Why did God want people to pray that He would do what He had already promised He would do? (1 Samuel 12:19-25)

In 1 Samuel 12 the people of God have gathered to celebrate a great victory won by their new king Saul, and to affirm his kingship – rather like a coronation. But then

Samuel gets up and reminds them that they did a great evil by even asking for a king in the first place. God sends a thunderstorm to emphasise His anger with them, and the people stand trembling in awe. They beg Samuel to pray for them, so that the Lord will not kill them. Samuel says it would be a sin if he did not pray for them. And yet he also says, "*For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people.*" So why this great concern to pray that God will keep His promises?

Is prayer unnecessary, if it is asking God to do something He has already promised He will do? If you met a man who was praying that God would not destroy the whole world in a flood, like He did in Noah's day, what would you say to that man? If you know God's promise in Genesis 9:11, you would tell that man that God has promised, with a covenant, that He will never destroy the world by flood again. You would tell that man that God is going to destroy the earth at Jesus' second coming, but by fire, not by flood. So he does not need to pray that God will not destroy the whole world in a flood. It is unnecessary, and it shows a lack of faith in God's covenant promise in Genesis 9.

I hope that you believe in the sovereignty of God, and in His almighty control over everything and everyone. But there is a danger that arises from our own sinful nature, if we do not hold that belief in balance with the other teaching of the Bible.

If you read the passage, you will see that although God affirms His promises to His people, He also said through

Samuel that their sin was so bad that, *“If you persist in doing evil, both you and your king will be swept away.”*

God does not make idle threats. If you read the Old Testament, you will see that, sadly, God often had to make threats to punish His people for their sin, and He often carried them out.

But there were times God did not carry out His threats. That was when His people PRAYED. In other words God wants to keep His covenant promises THROUGH the response of His people (N.B. not BECAUSE of their response).

More precisely, here in 1 Samuel 12, they asked Samuel to pray to God to forgive them for the wrong things they had done. And it was clearly his duty, as a Judge of Israel, to pray for them like that – he would have sinned if he did not. This was an essential prayer.

Application

Unlike these Old Testament people, we do not need a Samuel to pray for us – because Jesus prays for us. We can have access, in prayer, to God through Christ, and only through Christ.

As New Testament Christians, we are secure in the knowledge that Jesus forgives all the sins of whoever repents and believes in Him. But that does not mean when we fall into sin, that we can simply carry on doing evil.

We too need to ask God to forgive us on a regular basis. We need to pray *“deliver us from evil”* every day. We too must keep from evil, and serve the Lord with all our heart,

if we claim to be God’s people. It is as essential for us to pray as it was for Samuel.

Chapter 5 How could David be a “man after God’s own heart” and yet a sinner? (1 Samuel 13:13-14)

We remember David as the young man who was so concerned for God’s honour, that God enabled him to defeat Goliath with a shepherd’s sling. But then as King David, he committed adultery with Bathsheba. When she fell pregnant he tried to conceal it, and to trick her husband Uriah into thinking the child would be his. When Uriah, who acted far more honourably than David, did not cooperate, David engineered his death. David as good as murdered him. To make matters worse, David tried to keep the whole business a secret. So in 2 Samuel 12 the prophet Nathan comes and delivers a terrible rebuke from God to him. And God took the life of that first child Bathsheba bore him.

So it does seem very strange to us that God should call David a man after His own heart, here in 1 Samuel 13:14, when David sinned like this.

Since God knows all things, God knew David would sin, and yet still chose him to be king. The Lord does use imperfect people. David was not the only sinful person that God has ever used. The behaviour of some of the Judges, particularly Samson, is also, frankly, shockingly sinful. And yet the writer to the Hebrews includes Samson amongst the heroes of the faith. And Peter denied the Lord three times – and yet was greatly used by God in the early church, and wrote part of the New Testament.

So when God describes David as a man after His own heart I think God intends us to notice two important differences between David and Saul. The first difference is that, though both men sin, David is quick to repent of his sin, and seek God's forgiveness (see for example Psalm 51). Saul failed to repent, and was rejected by God. Saul even tried to hunt down David and kill him. There are many parallels between Saul's evil acts towards David, and the Pharisees' evil acts towards Jesus, God's anointed King.

So, in some ways David is a man after God's own heart because he suffered in a way that reminds us of how Jesus suffered.

But the most important difference between the two men is not simply the state of their hearts, but the heart that the Lord had towards them. God withdrew His love from Saul when he sinned, but He said He would never withdraw it from David.

God did not set His heart on David rather than Saul because of something good in David. It was not because David deserved it. Saul and David both disobeyed God. But when Saul sinned God took His love away from him, and yet He never took His love away from David, even though he disobeyed Him too. This is a great illustration of what is a key message of the Bible. God is gracious. God does not choose to bless us because we deserve it, but blesses us despite the fact that we do not deserve it. One of the greatest passages about that is Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

Application

God's grace is a great mystery. We do not understand how God can choose to love the unlovely. But He does. And thank God He does. We are all imperfect; none of us is without sin. If God only chose perfect people, then none of us would be chosen.

And the great love of God is that He chooses us for complete cleansing from sin – to be given a pure heart, like His heart is pure. If we are in Christ, He has taken the punishment for our sin in our place. His Holy Spirit is now at work in us, to make us more and more people after God's own heart.

Chapter 6 Saul appeared to get a genuine word from God via a medium, so why does God condemn such practices? (1 Samuel 28)

This passage raises some disturbing questions about witchcraft, and the power of mediums to call up the spirits of the dead. In any study of these subjects, we must remember that there is a real devil. He does have real power, and his aim is to deceive us and to destroy us. And he has followers who can tap into his powers and say and do things which are powerful, and impressive, and deceptive and dangerous.

Both the Old and New Testaments condemn witches and mediums, and all such people. In the very last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22:15, we read that "*those who practise magic arts*" will not be allowed into God's Holy City. So the Christian must not practise any of these things

– nor consult any of these people to contact the dead, or for any other reason.

Now King Saul knew that God had commanded this. In 1 Samuel 28:3, we read that he had expelled the mediums and spiritists from the land. But Saul himself had rebelled against God, and God had withdrawn His love from Saul. So when the time came when Saul had to face the army of the Philistines, full of fear, he sought the Lord's help through all the proper means, the priests and the prophets. But God would not answer him. So, in desperation, Saul disguised himself and went to the witch of Endor – a woman who was a medium. He asked her to call up Samuel from the dead.

Samuel told Saul (v19), *“The LORD will hand over both Israel and you to the Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. The Lord will also hand over the army of Israel to the Philistines.”* What Samuel said came true. Saul and his three sons fell in the battle, and the Philistines won a great victory.

So does this mean that the witch did God's will, because Samuel had a message from God for Saul? In other words, although the Bible condemns witches and mediums, if God worked through one on this occasion, might He do so again? Might there be times when we would be right in seeking information from the dead, via a medium?

No! As I stated in the introduction, a record is not necessarily a rule. The record of God delivering a message to Saul via the work of this woman does not endorse mediums. In the same way the record of Balaam's donkey speaking, does not mean we should seek guidance from

donkeys today. The woman was wrong, and unless she repented of her sin, and stopped being a medium, God will condemn her. And Saul was wrong to have gone to her. And, although, when he was brought back from the dead briefly, what Samuel said to Saul was more detailed than what he had said to him in his lifetime, it was basically the same message: *“The LORD has done what He predicted through me,”* says Samuel.

So the focus of our attention here should not be on whether it was right for Saul to use a medium – it was not. Our attention should be on the desperate situation Saul had got into. The LORD had become his enemy because Saul refused to obey Him when God warned Him through Samuel when Samuel was alive. So God stopped answering Saul, even though Saul desperately needed God's help. God was going to allow the Philistines to kill Saul, and was giving the kingship to David.

Application

All over the world, millions of people still consult mediums, believe in witchcraft, read their horoscopes, and so on. The devil ensnares people through these things, and the Christian must oppose them. But the real tragedy of Saul is that he did not need to do any of this. He was God's king, and he had God's prophet, Samuel, to bring him God's word, and guide him. Had Saul only listened to the true voice of God via Samuel when Samuel was still alive, then Saul would not have wanted or needed to seek to listen to Samuel after Samuel was dead.

There was no forgiveness for Saul. He had passed the point of no return, and was about to reap destruction. But

happily there is forgiveness still for whoever will turn away from their sin to trust in Christ. We find this in the place where God still speaks to us today – the Bible.

Chapter 7 Why does 2 Samuel 24:1-2 say God incited David to take a census, whereas 1 Chronicles 21:1-2 says Satan did?

There are a number of books in both the Old and New Testaments which give us a separate record of the same events. There are some differences between them that are easily explained, or do not really matter. But there are some differences that are difficult to explain, and very important. An example is the two different accounts of why David called a census, that we find in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21.

If you read those accounts in full, you will find one or two minor differences in detail – for instance the way the results of the census are given. But these two accounts are very clearly describing exactly the same events. But the most important difference is that in 2 Samuel God is said to be the one who incites David to take the census, whereas in 1 Chronicles Satan does the inciting. In 2 Samuel 24:1-2 we read, *“Again the anger of The LORD burned against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, ‘Go and take a census of Israel and Judah.’”* Yet in 1 Chronicles 21:1-2 it says *“Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.”*

This seems such a massive difference that we cannot ignore it. It might even lead us to doubt if the Old Testament is entirely accurate.

But in fact I think there is no problem here at all. I think both accounts are entirely accurate, but give a different view of events. I think that it is equally true to say God incited David, and Satan did.

If we believe in the sovereignty of God, we believe that He is in absolute control of the world, and everyone and everything in it. That means God is in absolute control of Satan. Satan is only able to do what he does because God permits him, and there is nothing Satan can do UNLESS God permits it. If you read the beginning of the book of Job you will see that.

Now God is love, and God is good. God does not commit evil acts, and God does not incite us to commit evil acts. James says that very clearly in James 1:13. But, because God is sovereign, He is able to use the evil that others do for His own good purposes.

Judas Iscariot is the classic example. He was an evil man who, egged on by the devil, betrayed Jesus. That was a total and inexcusable evil – the worst crime ever committed. And yet, because He is sovereign, Jesus spoke of this in advance as God’s plan – it was God’s will Judas should betray Him. So it is equally true to say that it was God’s plan for Jesus to be crucified, and also Satan’s plan for Jesus to be crucified. But all along we know that God is sovereign.

In the same way, the writer of 2 Samuel views David being incited to take the census as God’s will, and God’s plan, and so says God “did it”. The writer of 1 Chronicles, whilst also believing in God’s sovereignty, simply chooses

to focus on the means God used to do it – in this case Satan. But all along we know that God is sovereign.

Application

It should be a great comfort to know that the worst acts of the devil, or of men, are not beyond the control of God. Nothing happens to us in this life by accident. Whether it is good or bad, an evil deed or a good deed, the work of men or Satan, *“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him...”* (Romans 8:28).

Chapter 8 How can God bless those who murder babies? (Psalm 137:8&9)

Psalm 137:8-9 *“A daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”* This has got to be one of the most difficult passages in the whole of Scripture. Why did God say such a shocking thing as this?

This Psalm was written by an unknown author, at the time of the Jewish exile in Babylon. At this time of their greatest defeat and misery, God’s people were being mocked by their Babylonian captors, who wanted them to sing cheerful songs of praise to God. But they didn’t just mock – in verse 7, the Edomites encouraged the Babylonians to raze Jerusalem to its very foundation. In Jeremiah 52, you can read how the Babylonians did this, destroying the temple and the city.

Now this destruction has a particular significance in the Old Testament. It is not just an attack upon God’s people,

it is an attack upon God’s whole plan to save them, and us, if we are in Christ. These Edomites and Babylonians were not just neighbouring nations who were at war with Israel. These were the sworn enemies of God, and His plan for salvation. Psalm 83:4-8 describes how the Edomites, and the other enemies of Israel “plot together” to destroy Israel so that its name *“be remembered no more”*. If they had succeeded, then Christ could not have been born to an Israelite mother, and we could not be saved.

Therefore God said that nations who sought to destroy His people were to be destroyed themselves. That would have to have included killing the children and babies, because if the babies were spared, they would grow up to hear what was done to their parents, and become even more embittered enemies of God.

So Psalm 137:9 was saying to the Israelites, do not be hesitant about killing such babies because God will bless you for it. It was a necessary action to prevent God’s enemies overturning God’s plan of salvation. They could know they had God’s sanction to do something that would have been as repugnant and awful to them as to us.

Either shortly after, or shortly before, Psalm 137 was written, there were some amazing events that took place in Babylon which prove why such drastic action as slaughtering babies was necessary. You can read about it in the book of Esther. The people of God were nearly wiped out, babies and all, whilst in captivity, by Haman, the “Agagite”. He was probably a survivor of the Amalekite nation, whose king had been Agag. God had

told Saul to destroy the Amalekites, but obviously he had failed to do it properly.

Application

In these New Testament days the whole basis of God's plan of salvation has changed. Salvation no longer depends upon one nation, Israel, which must be defended from its enemies in the surrounding nations. God is saving people from every nation on earth. Christians still face enemies who are as determined to harm us as the Babylonians and Edomites were to harm Israel. But Jesus told us to love our enemies and do good to those who persecute us.

So the unique circumstances of Psalm 137 no longer apply. God does not sanction baby killing. God does not bless baby killers any longer. Nobody today can take these verses as any justification for killing babies or children, or harming them in any way. Jesus said in Matthew 19:14, "*Let the little children come to Me*". He was concerned for the well being of children. Every follower of Jesus should share His concern.

But these verses remind us of the enormous lengths God will go to, first to call, and then to preserve and protect, a people for Himself. Are you one of His people today – have you put your faith in Jesus Christ?

Chapter 9 Is there a contradiction between Luke 23:43 and John 20:17?

Where did Jesus go to, in between His death and resurrection? Is there a contradiction between what He

said to the dying thief before He died, recorded by Luke, and what He said to Mary after His resurrection, recorded by John? If Jesus went to paradise when He died, taking the penitent thief with Him, then how can He say He has "*not yet*" returned to the Father to Mary?

The thief was dying. But, unlike his fellow thief, he admitted that he deserved to die, and that his crimes merited crucifixion. But, because He recognized that Jesus was innocent, and was someone special, he calls upon Jesus to "remember" him, when He "comes into his kingdom."

Now it's not clear if this thief really appreciated who Jesus is – the Son of God. But Jesus wanted this man, and all of us who would read this, to understand something. He wanted to make it quite clear that when a person puts their trust in Him, they will go to paradise; they will go to Heaven.

Jesus' purpose here in Luke 23 was not to give a complete theology about what happens after death. If we look elsewhere in the Bible, we will find that when a believer dies, they are described as being "*with the Lord*" (2 Corinthians 5:8) and "*asleep*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). They are not actually in their final destination – the Holy City – that will come down from a new heaven onto a new earth.

Those who have died in Christ wait for the resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns. Then they, and we, if we are Christian believers, will be transformed instantly, given new resurrection bodies, which will never die, and in which we'll live in this city.

But Jesus' purpose is not to tell the thief all that here, as he is about to die. He just makes it simple – that very day this thief will be with Jesus in paradise, his sins forgiven. The fact that he has a whole lot more to look forward to after that, on the day of the resurrection of the dead, is something he now knows, and is eagerly awaiting.

When Jesus spoke to Mary, His purpose was different. She has been trusting in Jesus for some time; she is a believer. She was not about to die, and needing to have assurance of forgiveness. But she was doing something wrong – she was “*holding on*” to Jesus.

We can well imagine why – she was overjoyed at seeing Him back from the dead, and she never wanted to let Him go, she did not want to lose sight of Him again.

What Jesus has to teach her is that He has not been raised to life in order to spend many more years on earth, and continue His ministry. All He is going to do is appear to His disciples, and prove He is alive, before He ascended to be with His Father in Heaven, where He is now. His earthly ministry is already over, because He defeated sin and death on the cross. His ministry at God's right hand, interceding for us, and sending His Holy Spirit to live in us, cannot begin until He has gone to be with His Father. So, although He has just come back from Heaven, He speaks of not yet having gone there, in this final sense. There is therefore no contradiction between these two passages.

(N.B. See chapter 17 of this book for further discussion about where Jesus went to between His death and resurrection.)

Application

The most important application here comes from what Jesus said to the dying thief. We can have this same wonderful hope too, if we will put our faith in Jesus Christ. No matter what sin we have committed, Jesus will forgive us, and assures us of our place in paradise if we will repent and submit to Him as Lord and Saviour.

Chapter 10 What is the unforgivable sin? (Mark 3:20-35)

Many Christians have wondered at some time or other if they have committed the “eternal” or “unforgivable sin” this passage speaks of. Sometimes people worry that because they may have used bad language about God, or used His name as a swear word, they have committed this sin, and will not be forgiven.

But do note that in Mark 3:30 we read that Jesus mentioned this eternal sin because the teachers of the law said Jesus had an evil spirit. Faced with the clear evidence of their own eyes, that Jesus had cast many demons out of people, the teachers of the law said He could only do it because He Himself had an evil spirit. Jesus showed how ridiculous their argument was, and how they were deliberately, and horribly, distorting the truth. He did wonderful miracles by the power of His Holy Spirit, and they said He was doing evil, and His Spirit was evil. That was a terrible blasphemy – a disgusting lie – which the teachers told against the Holy Spirit.

Now the main work of the Holy Spirit is not actually casting out demons – it is convicting men and women of their sin and glorifying Jesus (see John 16:5-15). Unless the Holy Spirit shows us that we are sinners, and God is angry with us, we will never realize this on our own. So the work of the Spirit is essential if anyone is to be forgiven their sins.

But these men persist in denying the clear evidence of their own eyes, and in blaspheming the Spirit. We presume, therefore, that they will equally resist the Holy Spirit when He comes to convict them of sin. Therefore they cannot be forgiven.

The unforgivable, the eternal sin, therefore, is not one swear word, or one moment of blasphemy. It is a persistent attitude. It is willfully refusing to acknowledge the work of the Spirit as being the work of God. To continue in that attitude will prevent a person from ever coming to Christ to be forgiven. This is therefore the one sin that prevents all of a person's other sins from being forgiven.

Application

If a person is really concerned that they may have committed the unforgivable sin, then, by definition, it is extremely unlikely that they have committed it. Such a concern about sin is a work of the Holy Spirit in that person. It is the person who shows no concern about this sin, or any other sin, that is more likely to have committed it.

But even the “hardened” sinner can find grounds for hope in Mark 3. Surely Jesus is warning the teachers of the law about this sin, so that they will repent, and stop their blasphemy, and be forgiven?

And surely He means us to learn the lesson about what He says in 3:35, “*Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.*” God's will is not that we resist His Spirit, as He convicts us of our sin. It is God's will that whoever accepts they are a sinner, and turns from their sin to trust in Him, will be saved. It is God's will that whoever trusts in Jesus has the right to become a child of God.

Chapter 11 Why did God create Adam and Eve if He knew they would fall into sin? (John 1:1-14 & 13:31-32)

Some argue that, whilst God may well have created Adam and Eve, He did not foresee that they would fall into sin. Theological movements such as “open theism” portray a weak god whose purposes can be frustrated by his own creatures. But this is not the God of John 1, or anywhere else in the Bible. God not only created Adam and Eve, but He knew in advance that they would fall into sin. So why did God do this, at such great cost to Himself?

John 1:1-14 teaches that God created everything through Christ. It also teaches us that Christ gives the right to become children of God to those who believe in His name. Jesus had to suffer and die on the cross to make this possible. This cost Him so much that, in Gethsemane, He asked if there was any way that He might avoid it.

In Revelation 21:3 we see the glorious consummation of Christ's work on the Cross, when a loud voice declares, *"Now the dwelling of God is with men and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

God created mankind, knowing we would fall, for this glorious purpose of redeeming a people for Himself through Christ. That does not mean God wanted us to fall into sin. God has never been the cause of any sinful act that man has ever carried out. James 1:13 tells us that, *"God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone"*. Yet the whole of the Bible shows us how God works through human sinfulness and weakness. Nothing has ever happened in human history that was outside of His purpose and His plan, or that ever frustrated or surprised Him.

But we must add a further important point. God did not simply redeem us because He loves us – which we read in John 3:16. God's glorious purposes are not all centred on the importance and value we hold for Him. John 3:16 needs to be read along with John 13:31. Immediately after Judas Iscariot had gone out to betray Him, Jesus said, *"Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in Him"*. He was speaking of His coming crucifixion. When He died and rose again to pay the price for sin, and purchase a people for God, Jesus brought the greatest glory to Himself, to God. The most important reason that God

created man, knowing he would fall, and sending Jesus to redeem us, is because all this greatly glorifies Him.

We may fail to understand how it can be God's highest motive to bring glory to Himself. This is because I would be arrogant and proud if my greatest motive was to seek my own glory, and the praise of others. But God is infinitely glorious. If He does not seek His own glory, then the praise due to Him will be given to another, which is idolatry.

Application

God is greatly glorified when a sinful and corrupt human being, who by nature hates God and is not capable of calling on His Name, repents of their sin and trusts in Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Therefore evangelism is one of the greatest and most glorious works we can ever do for God.

But God is also glorified when a sinner who does not repent is punished for their sin. At the end of time God will be most greatly glorified when the new heaven and the new earth are peopled by sinners saved by grace – people who are there not because they in any way deserved it, but simply because of God's supreme mercy and redeeming grace.

The purpose of all human life is that we should come to know God through Jesus Christ and glorify Him forever. When those who have trusted in Christ are welcomed into the presence of God in eternity, knowing that they are not there on their own merit, but because God Himself saved

them by shedding His own blood, they will never be able to stop praising and glorifying Him for it.

As the hymn writer John Newton so aptly put it, *“When we’ve been there ten thousand years bright shining as the sun, there’s no less days to sing God’s praise than when we first begun.”*

Chapter 12 Should we expect to find prophets like Agabus in the church today? (Acts 21:7-14)

There are many passages in the New Testament which indicate that prophets and prophesying were part of the regular life of the early Church. Acts 21 speaks of Philip’s four daughters who prophesied – presumably on a regular basis. We do not know what they prophesied about, but it would be strange if their prophesying was very different from what Luke immediately goes on to mention – Agabus’ prophesying. The Holy Spirit appears to have spoken regularly through prophets like these girls and Agabus to give direct words from God to His people. So, should we still expect to find prophets like them in church today?

We need to look at what Agabus said, and why. God spoke to Paul through Agabus’ prophecy, warning him again of what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had already warned Paul that prison and hardships would face him in every city (Acts 20:23), but now, through Agabus, God gave Paul the specific warning that the Jews in Jerusalem would hand him over to the Gentiles, as indeed they did.

Paul needed to know that for his strengthening and encouragement. And Luke and his other companions needed to know it too – and to realize that, although it made them weep, it was God’s will for Paul. This greatest of all missionaries was to lose his liberty for years, and then lose his life. His friends and partners in ministry needed to know this was all part of God’s plan. If you read on in Acts you can see how God brought great good out of Paul’s imprisonment.

That’s the record. But should it be a rule? Should we expect God to speak to us regularly through prophets today for our strengthening and encouragement? Three things make me hesitate to expect God to speak like this today (although, unlike some, I would not want to rule out that He may speak like this at times, if He wants to).

1. Is there anything God wants us to do for Him that is so difficult that we need a special prophecy to prepare us to do it? Paul had a unique and special apostolic mission, which would lead him to prison, and death, for which he and his partners needed encouragement.
2. Is there anything that God might want to say to you and me today, that He hasn’t already said in the Bible? At the time when Agabus prophesied, much, if not most, of the New Testament was either not yet written, or not in circulation in all the churches. 2 Timothy 3:15 and 16 says that Scripture thoroughly equips us for every good work. Now we have the complete Bible, does God need to speak to us through prophets?
3. If God did speak to us through prophets, how would we know it was God? If someone told us God had given

them a message for us, how would we know if they were telling the truth? The only way would be to check what they said, to see if it agreed with the Bible. And if what they said agreed with the Bible, then what would be the point of God sending them to us to tell us this? We could have read it for ourselves in the Bible!

Application

I was once a guest at a wedding where a man got up and claimed to have a prophecy for the married couple. He said something that sounded very much like 1 Corinthians 3:10-15, but in slightly different words. He claimed God had told him to tell the couple to build their marriage on Christ.

After the service I pointed out to him privately that he would have done better to simply read 1 Corinthians 3 to the congregation. Then we and the married couple would have known it was God's word, and taken it to heart. But, by claiming to have a prophecy, he made it all seem more dramatic. And he appeared more important as a "prophet", than simply as a person reading the Scripture.

His "prophecy" wasn't anything like as good as 1 Corinthians 3. It was probably "plagiarism" – he'd got the idea about what to say from 1 Corinthians 3, but wanted to claim it was a prophecy. I honestly doubt if it was a genuine prophecy. I think we are far better off studying the Bible, than seeking prophets today.

Chapter 13 How can a God of love hate someone before they are even born? (Romans 9:10-15)

"Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." So says John in 1 John 4:8. So how can God hate someone before they are even born? And it was not only one man, Esau, who God hated before he was even born, it was also all Esau's descendants. Romans 9 is quoting from Malachi. The descendants of Esau were the Edomites who are described in Malachi 1:4 as *"always under the wrath of the LORD"*. How could God hate a whole nation like this?

Paul says that God made His choice to hate Esau and love Jacob BEFORE either of them had done anything good or bad. It was so that God's purpose in election, in choosing Jacob, might stand. God did not choose to love Jacob because he was good, but simply because God will have mercy on whom He chooses, and compassion on whom He will have compassion. God's choice to love someone is not based upon anything good He sees in them, it is only because God chooses to be merciful to them.

To fully understand this, we need to look at what Paul has said earlier in Romans 3. In that chapter he lists a string of passages from the Old Testament, showing how sinful all of mankind is, and sums it up by saying (v23), *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*. Jacob was a sinner like Esau. There was nothing to choose between them, or between any of us for that matter – we are all guilty sinners. God created human beings to be perfect and sinless. But we chose to sin and rebel against Him. And now every single human being is full of sin.

That being so, then God must hate not just Esau, not just the Edomites, but every single human being – because we are all bad. He is pure and holy, and He must hate what is

bad and sinful. Furthermore, because He is God, He must hate us before we are even born, because He knows the future. He knows that each and every one of us will turn out bad. Once we understand that, then we are not surprised that a God of love should hate not just Esau before he was born, but all of us.

So the real question is not “how can a God of love hate someone before they are born?”, but “how can a God of love, love any of us, when we’re all bad?” It’s amazing that God should choose to love any of us at all. Rather than objecting to the fact that He chose to love Jacob, and not Esau, we should thank God that he has promised to pour out His love on anyone who will put their trust in Jesus Christ.

Application

The way God dealt with people in the Old Testament was very different from the way He deals with people today. It no longer matters if you are a descendant of Esau, or a descendant of Jacob, or a descendant of somebody quite different. In His great love and mercy towards us, God sent Jesus Christ to die for all the sinners who will repent, and turn to Him for forgiveness – no matter what their race, or background.

And God has promised to change all those who will trust in Christ from sinners into fruitful servants of Him. He does all this, not because He foresaw some good in us before we were born, for there is none, but because of His great love and grace.

Chapter 14 Does 2 Corinthians 6:14 teach that a Christian should not marry a non-Christian? (2 Corinthians 6:11-7:1)

A Christian ought not to choose to enter into a marriage with a non-Christian. 1 Corinthians 7:39 teaches this very clearly. Paul says to the widow who remarries that her husband “*must belong to the Lord*”. What is true for the widow is true for any Christian. We must not choose to marry a non-Christian (see the special note at the end of the chapter for a discussion about those who live in societies where they have no choice about who to marry).

Now, what Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:14 clearly does have some application to marriage. But I do not think it is the main theme of that passage. And, if we do apply 2 Corinthians 6:14, to marriage, we must be careful we do not also place an unscriptural worry upon the Christian who is married to a non-Christian.

What is the main theme of 2 Corinthians 6:14? In 2 Corinthians 11:2-5 we find Paul’s great concern in writing this letter was all about “super-apostles”. These men were undermining the faith of the Corinthians, and leading them astray from Jesus. Paul is concerned that the purity of the Corinthian Christians may become contaminated.

This “purity” and “contamination” theme of 2 Corinthians 11 is also the theme of 2 Corinthians 6:14. That is why I selected the passage to start at chapter 6:11 and end at chapter 7:1 (remember, our chapter and verse divisions were added hundreds of years later; they are not Paul’s). In chapter 6:11-13, Paul is asking the Corinthians to open

their hearts to him. We know from chapter 11 that, instead, they were opening their hearts to the false super-apostles. In chapter 7:1, Paul sums up the section, by reminding them the issue is the danger of being led into impurity – by being yoked with the super-apostles, or anyone else. The main theme of this passage is therefore not about marriage – it is about guarding your heart from false teaching which will contaminate you.

If guarding against being yoked with those who will lead us into impurity is what chapter 6:14 is about, then we must ask an important question. Might a Christian become impure by being yoked with their non-Christian husband or wife? Certainly, if you read 1 Corinthians 7, it ought to be obvious from all Paul says here that marriages between believers and unbelievers will be full of difficulty. So no one ought to choose to enter into one. It will be hard for a Christian wife to remain pure and devoted to Christ, if her husband is a non-Christian. He will be incapable of being her head, under Christ, and fulfilling the role described in Ephesians 5:22-33.

In all these, and other ways, a non-Christian husband might possibly be stated to influence his Christian wife towards impurity. But to carry on this line of thought to say he “contaminates” her can easily cause the Christian an unscriptural worry. Will their non-Christian husband/wife actually make them “impure” when they are yoked together in that most intimate way of all – sexual intercourse? Back in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul warns that committing sexual immorality with a prostitute is a sin against your own body, which is a temple of The Holy Spirit. There is the idea

here that wrong sexual relations can contaminate the Christian. We can easily imagine how an anxious Christian wife who heard this might want to ask Paul if she would be sinning when she had sexual relations with her non-Christian husband. Will he somehow contaminate her? Should she therefore separate from him?

So chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians opens with the commandment to husbands and wives to fulfil those marital duties towards one another. Paul says the Christian will not be contaminated by their non-Christian husband or wife – far from it. 1 Corinthians 7:14 says the Christian will actually sanctify the non-Christian. It is an unscriptural worry, an unnecessary and harmful worry, for a Christian to fear contamination from their non-Christian husband/wife. This is important news for the Christian who is converted after marriage, and whose husband/wife remains unconverted, or for the Christian woman who has been compelled to marry a non-Christian. She need not fear that he will make her impure. She should go on, as 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 says, living with him in the fullness of marriage, as long as he is willing. She must not separate from him.

Application

The primary application of 2 Corinthians 6:14 is not to marriage, but to all those other areas of life where we may be “yoked” with unbelievers. The super-apostles wanted to bring the Corinthians under a yoke of slavery to Satan. We must beware of cults, and false religions, whose leaders seek to do the same today.

Many of the Corinthians would also have faced pressure to be yoked at work in a way that would fit this description. In many trades and professions they were forced to worship the “patron” idol. There were gods and goddess which you had to worship if you were to carry out your trade. Paul says a Christian should not let himself be yoked like that. Perhaps, today, we would say that becoming a partner in a business with non-Christians would be like that. A Christian might find himself forced to agree with some shady dealings which the non-Christian partners in the business wanted to carry out.

In some societies Christians are “yoked” to the television, and the worldly teaching it constantly broadcasts. We probably don’t think about applying 2 Corinthians 6:14 in these ways as much as we should – because we too often apply it only to marriage. There are clearer passages (e.g. 1 Corinthians 7) than this to apply to marriage, which will not result in the “unscriptural worry” above.

Special note on “forced” marriages

In certain societies Christians may have no choice about who they can marry. They may be forced by their parents to marry a non-Christian. In some societies, non-Christian parents have disowned, or even murdered their Christian children, when they refused to marry a non-Christian. We should show the greatest sympathy and prayerful support for any Christian who has been forced to marry a non-Christian, as we also should for one who is converted after being married, and whose husband/wife remains unconverted.

However, we should also strongly urge any unmarried Christian who has the power to refuse to marry a non-Christian, to continue to refuse. This may mean we must offer them help to do so. In certain situations this might mean a suitable Christian family must be willing to offer protection to a Christian woman who faces a “forced” marriage to a non-Christian. She may need to come and live in their home as an “adopted” daughter, for an indefinite period.

If such situations occur in your society, would your family be a suitable and safe place of refuge? If so, would you be willing to offer such a woman the same protection and provision you would give to your own daughter? Her only other options may be marriage to an unbeliever, being disowned by her family, or even death.

Would you still offer her this protection if it would put you and your own family at risk from the woman’s parents? We cannot urge our Christian brothers and sisters to risk homelessness or death out of their obedience to Christ, unless we are equally prepared to take some risks to support them.

Chapter 15 Can we lose our salvation? (Heb 6:4-12)

The terrible and final way in which these people have fallen makes Hebrews 6 one of the most difficult passages in the Bible for those of us who believe the sorts of things about God that I set out in the introduction – that He is infinite and He is sovereign. He has chosen us since before the creation of the world (Ephesians 1:4&5). Jesus makes many promises about our eternal security, e.g. (John 6:39)

“I shall lose none of all that God has given me, but raise them up at the last day.” Sadly, we know the Christian may temporarily backslide, such as Peter did by denying Christ. But he will always be restored, and like the prodigal son, be welcomed back. But these people in Hebrews 6:4-6 have fallen away finally and permanently. They cannot be brought back. This is truly terrifying.

Since this is a letter to the Hebrews, these particular people have probably fallen back into practising Old Testament religion, making sacrifices at the temple, and so on. This is therefore not some temporary backsliding into sin or unbelief. They have deliberately chosen to go back to the obsolete Old Testament religion, which was a mere shadow of the realities of Christ. They have committed apostasy.

How is such a fall possible? We believe our salvation does not depend upon us. Paul told the Philippian Christians that he was confident that (Philippians 1:6) *“He Who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion...”* In the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, over and over again we read that true believers will overcome; we will not lose our salvation. All of the teaching of the New Testament seems to teach the perseverance of the saints. That is to say, those whom God brings to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ will persevere, will continue in the faith, and will not fall away. So, how then, can these people in Hebrews 6 be spoken of as having lost their salvation in this manner?

Some would argue that these verses must be describing people who were never converted. They came very close

to being converted – they “tasted” it, but never quite got there. And they have fallen back into their unbelief.

This is a possible explanation. But I am reluctant to offer it, because by doing so I may strip not just these verses, but the whole book of Hebrews of all its force. The writer is warning Christians (not non-Christians) of a real danger here. The warning is repeated, or at least something that sounds very like it, more than once in this letter – for instance in 4:1 and 11 and 10:26-27.

We must not be so unbalanced in stressing what the Bible affirms about our eternal security, that we dismiss what the Bible also warns us about equally clearly. God has written these warnings here repeatedly for Christians. If we simply dismiss the warnings because we do not think they can apply to us, then we are in danger of doing exactly what Hebrews warns against – hearing God’s word but hardening our hearts against it.

So I want to encourage us to heed this warning, rather than argue that it cannot apply to Christians. I want us to be absolutely certain we do not fall into the danger that Hebrews warns we CAN fall into. If we do not think we CAN fall into this danger, then why do we think God is warning us of it? Does God make idle threats (see chapter 5)? I do not think He does.

So, let me draw your attention to Hebrews 6:9. There the writer says he is confident of better things in the case of those he is writing to. He is confident that they will not fall into this danger. Instead he is confident that they will have the things that accompany salvation. They will not become apostates.

What gives him that confidence? First of all, note who he was writing these words to. Unlike many other New Testament letters, we do not know who wrote this one, or who exactly he wrote it to. We call it the letter to the Hebrews, because it clearly does deal with issues that would have been of great interest and importance to Jews. However, there is a very clear description of who the people the letter is being written to in chapter 3:1: *“...holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus the Apostle and high priest whom we confess.”*

We learn two important things about the people the writer of Hebrews is writing to from chapter 3:1. Firstly these people share in the heavenly calling, they have been chosen by God, they are converted. That means they have begun the Christian life in the only possible way – through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

But do note, secondly, that they have continued in the Christian life – they still “confess” Christ; they have not stopped. The point is made more strongly in chapter 10:39. These people have started, and are continuing in the Christian life. That is why he has confidence they will not shrink back and be destroyed, like those of chapter 6:4-6, but they will continue, and be saved.

Application

If you have started with Christ, and are going on with Christ to maturity, then you can have every confidence that you are a Christian, and God will keep you from falling like people in chapter 6:4-6. Though, like Peter, we may backslide temporarily, we will always repent and come

back if we belong to Christ. As a wise Christian once said, “A Christian is not someone who never falls into sin. But a Christian is a person who, having fallen, always repents, and carries on once again following Christ.” But if a person claims to be a Christian, but does not continue living the Christian life, then we must eventually doubt if they ever were a Christian.

In Matthew 7:22 Jesus warns that MANY will call Him “*Lord, Lord*” on judgment day, but will prove to be false. They will have deceived themselves, and others, about their conversion, but not God. You can have full confidence that you will not be one of them, if you have started with Christ, and are continuing with Him.

Chapter 16 Does James 5:13-20 “guarantee” healing? (James 5:13-20)

Not everyone who calls for the elders to pray over him, and anoint him with oil, gets well. In fact, even the Apostles, who God enabled to heal the sick, could not always heal every sick person. In 2 Timothy 4:20 Paul speaks about leaving Trophimus sick in Miletus. That is exactly the same Greek word for sick as is here in James. It seems that Paul could not heal Trophimus, despite the fact that he was able to heal sick people miraculously, as he did on Malta.

So, we must beware of understanding James 5:15 as an unconditional promise or “guarantee” that God will always heal every sick person, if the elders have anointed them like this. If that was true, then the church would have very few sick people in it; we would not need any doctors or

hospitals, and we would all live to a very old age on this present earth.

To understand this promise here in James, we need to ask, is James' main concern the healing of the sick, or the forgiveness of sins? James quickly moves on in 5:15b and 16 from discussing healing from sickness to discussing forgiveness of sin. He closes the letter with the instruction that we are to try to save one another from sinning. It seems that James' concern about sickness is only a part of a much greater concern about sin. It also seems very likely that the sick man in James 5 is only sick because he has sinned.

It is vital to note here that people get sick for all sorts of reasons, not necessarily because they have sinned. Great harm has been done by Christians who, like Job's comforters, are too swift to tell a sick person that their illness is due to some sin. We cannot, and we must not say that everyone who is sick has sinned in some way.

But there were occasions, such as the ones Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, where God did, and possibly still does afflict sinners with sickness, directly because of their sin. So when a Christian falls sick, and we also suspect they may have sinned in some way, but not confessed it, then we ought to be at least open to the possibility that their sickness and their sin might be connected. If that sin is confessed, and dealt with in the manner described here in James, then we can expect that person to be healed of the sickness that God sent for that very purpose – to prompt the sinner to confess.

Application

I know of many churches which expect God to heal any sick person that they pray for – whether or not the elders have anointed them with oil. I once had a minister say to me that it was quite “unacceptable” that a lady in his church continued being ill, despite all the church's prayers for her. I also know of many churches where people are far too quick to diagnose every sickness as being due to sin. What we require is a sensible biblical balance. When a person is sick, we must be alert to the possibility that it MAY be because they have sinned, but not rush to a hasty judgment.

But the main concern James has is not that the sick should all be healed, but that we should all confess our sins to one another, and judge ourselves, and help one another not to wander away from the truth. How much of our prayer life and church life is spent doing this – helping one another not to sin? God does not guarantee our healing from all sickness, but He does guarantee the forgiveness of all our sins, if we confess them and repent.

Chapter 17 Is there a second chance to repent after death? (1 Peter 3:17-4:1)

Some people have connected these verses with Genesis 6:1-8, which we looked at in chapter 2. That passage talks about the sons of God marrying the sons of men, and a time of great evil on earth, that led God to send the flood. We concluded that the sons of God were those people in the godly line of Seth, and the sons of men were everyone else. This whole world of evil men lost their lives in the flood – and they now await judgment. So does 1 Peter

3:19-20 teach that Jesus went to them, and preached, so that they could have a second chance to repent after death? Passages like Hebrews 9:27, and the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31, make it very clear there is no second chance to repent after death. Therefore I do not think 1 Peter 3 indicates that Jesus was preaching to the disembodied spirits of sinful men in order to give them a second chance to repent after death.

If you look at 1 Peter 3:22, I think there is a clue as to not only who Jesus preached to, but what He preached. It says that angels, authorities and powers are in submission to Him. Fallen angels, or demons, initially tried to oppose Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. He constantly had to throw them out of people. The devil entered into Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him. So these evil authorities and powers must have thought they had gained a great victory when Jesus was crucified and died.

Was it these evil spirits who Jesus came to preach to in prison? “Prison” may simply be a picture of how they are kept restricted, and under God’s control. It might be Peter’s way of describing what John describes in Revelation 20 as Satan being “bound”. 1 Peter 3:22 may indicate that what Jesus preached to them was the fact that they were in submission to Him. What they thought was their great victory, getting Him crucified through Judas’ betrayal, was actually their defeat.

If this interpretation is correct, then this preaching is not a second chance for humans to repent after death, it is a victory proclamation made to Satan and his evil spirits, now imprisoned. It might be that, long ago, in the time of

Noah, Satan and his demons were not bound, and disobeyed God in some particular way. But now they are bound, and are awaiting Jesus’ return, when they will be cast into the lake of fire.

(N.B. see chapter 9 for further discussion about what Jesus did between His death and resurrection.)

Application

We must not spend so much time wondering who Jesus preached to or where, that we miss the great truth taught in this passage. Jesus is Lord and Saviour. And nor must we overlook what God wants us to do about this great truth. Jesus has suffered, dying for the unrighteous and defeating Satan. We need to arm ourselves with the same attitude, and be prepared to suffer along with Him, fighting sin (1 Peter 4:1). It will not be of any value if we suffer for doing evil, but if we suffer for doing good, like Jesus, this will please God.

1 Peter 3:17 reminds us that we must not be tempted to think that because we are suffering for doing good then something must be wrong. And we must not despair when we suffer at the hands of Satan, or evil men – because the evil forces that oppose us have all been defeated.

Chapter 18 Where do Christians go after death? (Revelation 20:11-21:4)

Revelation 20:13-15 reminds us of the fact that those who have died without repenting of their sin, and trusting in Christ, await a resurrection to judgment, and condemnation

to Hell. Little is said in the Bible about where their souls are now.

The Bible says much more about where Christians go after death. One of the most common ways the New Testament describes Christians who have died is “*asleep*” (e.g. Acts 7:60, 1 Thessalonians 4:13). Their souls have gone to be with Jesus, but their bodies are here in the grave. In Revelation 6:9 we read that the souls of the martyrs, those who, like Paul almost certainly was, were put to death for Christ’s sake, are under the altar in heaven. We see them there in a protected and privileged position. But they are awaiting the resurrection of the dead. They are waiting for the day of Jesus’ return, when, at that last trumpet, they will be raised to eternal life in resurrection bodies which are imperishable – they will never get sick or die.

Christians often talk about “going to heaven” after we die – as disembodied souls, whilst our bodies lie in the grave. This has led many non-Christian people to wonder what we will do there for all eternity. Some say we will have nothing to do except sit on a cloud and strum harps all day long. Many people think heaven will be boring, and they have no interest in going there. But Revelation 21 and 22 tells us that our final destination, as Christians, will be a marvellous and totally interesting and absorbing place.

We are human beings, and without physical bodies we are incomplete – or as Paul describes it, we are naked (2 Corinthians 5:3). God’s great plan for Christians is that on this day of Jesus’ return we will be raised to life, not to live as spirits in heaven, but as human beings in a wonderful city. The resurrection bodies we will have will be far

better than the ones we have now. We will never again know sickness or death or sorrow or pain. And we will live in God’s presence forever, in this Holy City He will bring down onto a new earth for us.

Revelation 21:1 says there will be no sea on the new earth. This is for several reasons. The sea is not our element – the land is. There will be nothing on the new earth that is not perfectly suitable for us, and we for it. Also, in Revelation 13, a terrible beast comes out of the sea, which is given power to make war against the saints, and to conquer them. Since we cannot normally see what is under the water, perhaps God is reassuring us, by not having any sea on the new earth, that there is no threat of another beast lurking deep under water where we cannot see it.

In Exodus the Red Sea was a barrier that God had to give Moses the power to part, before the Israelites could escape. The sea keeps people apart from each other. But on the new earth we will not want anything to keep us apart from Christ, or from one another – so we will not want any sea. The greatest thing of all about this Holy City is in Revelation 21:3 – it is where we will be with the Lord forever, never to be parted from Him.

Application

When a Christian dies, we are not wrong when we say that he or she has gone to heaven. But it is enormously important that we do not just talk as if this temporary state of being a disembodied spirit in heaven is our final destination. We must not fail to tell people the whole gospel. We must not fail to talk about our resurrection – to

live in this wonderful city, and the perfect bodies in which we will live there forever.

And along with that, let us not fail to warn people about the only other destination on offer – a lake of fire – eternal punishment in Hell, for those who reject Jesus Christ.

I am not sure that we have always been clear enough about what Jesus has saved us FOR – eternal life with Him in this wonderful city – and what He has saved us FROM – eternity in hell – the lake of fire. If people once understand these are the only two destinations, then how can they refuse the gospel?

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