

Tough Texts

A close-up photograph of an open book with Hebrew text, a wooden gavel, and a small white container with yellow capsules on a wooden surface. The book is open to a page with Hebrew text, and the gavel is positioned diagonally across the foreground. The container is tilted, and several capsules are visible inside. The background is dark and out of focus.

by Justin McCorkle

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Introduction

“[Regard] the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction.” (2 Peter 2:15-16)

The apostle Peter acknowledges that there are difficult things to understand in the writings of Paul. There are difficult texts from other inspired writers as well. Peter goes on to issue warnings concerning these difficult texts; “untaught and unstable” people “distort” these passages and the rest of Scripture. His purpose is not to discourage consideration of difficult texts but rather to remind Christians that the study of God’s word is an important task that must be approached with reverence.

It is the author’s hope that this study book will benefit the reader in not only understanding a few difficult texts but also in considering the process through which we can come to understand difficult passages in Scripture. We will be approaching each study with a mind for context and harmony. It is hoped that the author can convey a respect for the sacred texts that will help all to keep from straying to the left or right.



Romans 2:14-16

IN PREPARATION

READ ROMANS 1-3

THINK ABOUT IT

WHAT “LAW” DO THE GENTILES “NOT HAVE”?

WHY IS THEIR OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW

“INSTINCTIVE”? IS THIS A REFERENCE TO ALL OF THE LAW OF MOSES OR ONLY CERTAIN PARTS?

THEIR CONSCIENCE WILL BEAR THEM WITNESS TO ACCUSE OR EXCUSE, WHEN? WHY ON THAT DAY?

“For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”

Much is said about the “law” of the Gentiles. The only nation given a directly inspired Law from God was Israel. Throughout the Old Testament we read of God’s deliverance of the message and the expectation that His words would be obeyed. But what about the Gentiles? Were they without law? The passage under consideration speaks of God’s view of their actions, a “law to themselves,” and their thoughts “accusing or else defending them” at judgment. This oft misrepresented text should be handled carefully lest too much be read into Paul’s words.

The Context of Romans 1-3

These verses fall within a conversation about the sin of man and their guilt before God without the saving power of the gospel. Romans 1:19-32 speaks primarily concerning the Gentile nations. These people had practiced all types of sin including idolatry and homosexuality. Due to these things, Paul says they “are worthy of death.” (1:32) He turns his attention to the Jews in chapter 2 and demonstrates that, due to their hypocrisy, the Jews also deserve the “judgment of God.” (2:3) He suggests that they are no better than the Gentiles since the Jews break the Law they were given. Chapter 3 moves the discussion to the individual level where the apostle explains that “all have

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sinned and fall short of the glory of God". (3:23) It is in the midst of this conversation that Paul's reflections upon the Gentiles' righteousness (or lack thereof) is found in 2:14-16.

Paul's Main Point

Before we begin close examination, it is good to reflect upon overall point being made in the passage so that we do not "miss the forest for the trees." As was discussed, these verses are found within Paul's consideration of the sins of the Jews. He summarizes his point at the end of the chapter by saying, "he is a Jew who is inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God." (2:29) Paul was this type of a Jew. Overall, however, the Jews had overlooked the Messiah and hated those of their brethren who followed Him. They were hypocrites and missed the point of the Law altogether. The Gentiles are only referenced within chapter 2 in order to condemn the Jew's behavior by comparison. The Jews were so wicked, Paul says, that the "name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (2:24)

When we read verses 14-16 we are not reading an in depth analysis of a law for the Gentiles or a theological discussion of the Lord's relationship with them. Instead, we are reading a critique of Jewish behavior using the behavior of the Jews as a standard of comparison. Paul says, "it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." (2:13) This not-so-subtle jab is meant to accuse the Jews of being "hearers only." At this point, Paul brings the Gentiles into consideration.

Gentiles: Keeping the Law when Jews Don't

When Paul considers the Gentiles in this text, as though he is speaking to Jews, he says they "do not have the Law" but "instinctively do the things of the Law." (14) What did the Gentiles often do "instinctively" that the Jews did not? Paul later mentions the sins of stealing (2:21), committing adultery (2:22), and robbing temples (2:22). It seems as though Paul is suggesting that the Jews often behaved in ways that the Gentiles had instinctively identified as sinful! This "instinct" made the Gentiles a

Romans 2:14-16

“law to themselves.” (2:14) There was a certain level of understanding that any Gentile could come to even without the Law of Moses. (Compare this thought to Romans 1:18-19) This is the type of Law that is “written in their hearts.” (2:15) If they violate such basic principles as these, Paul says their own conscience will bear witness against them. (2:15) At the final judgment the apostle says they will answer to God for this behavior. (2:16)

The point has been made not to renew a condemnation of the Gentiles but for the purpose of condemning the Jews! He continues by saying, “But if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God” and play the hypocrite, how much worse are you than a Gentile who has learned better by instinct!

God and the Gentiles

The question is raised, then, “By what law will the Gentiles be judged who were not under the Law of Moses?” Truthfully, we cannot answer that question fully. It has not been revealed. If we are to take any hint from Romans 2:14-16 it is that God expected them to treat one another with respect by respecting such things as property and marital relationships. These things are self evident. Any discussion beyond this point is purely speculation.

Still others attempt to suggest that there are two laws in existence today; one for Christians and another for the Gentiles. This passage is often referenced to “prove” that argument. However, Paul’s point is exactly the opposite. The discussion of chapter two is set under the time of the Law of Moses. Chapters one through three are meant as a build up to prove why there is such a need for the gospel and this gospel is God’s method for salvation today “to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” (1:16) There is no separate path for salvation. There is one way to God. (John 14:6) Through the gospel God has called “all people” to repentance. (Acts 17:30)

Although we may wonder at how God viewed the Gentiles during the old covenant, there is no wondering left for us today. We must come to Christ and live or refuse His call and die in our sins.

Romans 2:14-16

What is the main argument of Romans chapters 1-3?

How does Paul's reference to the Gentiles in 2:14-16 and 2:24 aid Paul's argument concerning the unrighteousness of the Jews?

What are the specific sins Paul mentions in Romans 2:21-22?

In your own words, summarize the meaning of Romans 2:14-16.



Romans 4:1-5

IN PREPARATION

READ ROMANS 4

THINK ABOUT IT

ABRAHAM IS WHOSE
“FOREFATHER
ACCORDING TO THE
FLESH”?

DOES ANYONE WHO
IS TRULY JUSTIFIED
BY GOD HAVE
“SOMETHING TO
BOAST ABOUT”
BEFORE GOD?

WHO IS ABRAHAM
TRULY A FATHER
OF? (ROMANS 4:11)

“What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness”.

This instructive text that was intended to correct misunderstandings of many Jews has sadly become a haven for misunderstandings in the religious world today. These words which were meant to condemn a sinful type of mindset concerning justification are now often being used to defend living in sin. As we open our bibles let us also open our minds to the context of Paul’s words and instruction from the Holy Spirit.

A Jewish Problem

The apostle has been speaking to the Jewish mind as though explaining the gospel through Jewish objections. In chapter two he condemns the hypocrisy of the Jewish people and lack of inward conversion. In chapter three he explains benefits of having been given the Law of Moses (namely, knowledge of sin). However, “now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested”. (3:21) Gentiles were obeying the gospel and becoming God’s children without having to become Jews. But, to the Jewish mind, righteousness comes through the Law of Moses. Paul foresees this struggle within the Jewish student and begins to explain the truth at the end of chapter three: “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the

Romans 4:1-5

contrary, we establish the Law.” (3:31) When chapter four begins Paul is seeking to explain how justification has always been attained by man through the example of Abraham, the patriarch and father of the Jewish people.

Abraham: “one who does not work”

In 4:1 Paul makes clear that he is still communicating to the Jews saying, “Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh”. The question is asked by Paul, ‘how was Abraham justified?’ To answer this question he discusses two possibilities; “faith” or “works.” Context must determine how we define these terms. In fact, Paul gives us an explanation of his usage of the word “works” in this context: “to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due.” (4:4) Therefore, the idea that Paul is combatting is the one which says that ‘God owes me something.’ This was a common problem in Jewish thinking at the time!

That mindset is set in contrast with the thinking of Abraham. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham “believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.” His righteousness did not come through the Law of Moses. Nor did Abraham think that God owed him justification. Rather, Abraham was one who trusted in the word of Lord and humbly obeyed in faith. (See Hebrews 11:8-10, 17-19.) Therefore, Abraham is an example of “one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the godly”. (4:5) Abraham did obey God, but he did not “work” as per Paul’s definition in 4:4. Abraham was one who believed in “Him who justifies the ungodly.”

“Works” versus “Works”

This passage is often set in opposition to James’ teaching in James 2:21-24. That text also considers Abraham as an example but is instead teaching that “Abraham our father was justified by works”. (2:21) Some have accused Paul and James of disagreeing and arguing with one another about the role of “works” in a Christian’s life. However, these two men were dealing with completely different problems and, contextually, had completely different definitions of the word “works.” While Paul was overthrowing a Jewish mind which depending upon earning righteousness through the Law of Moses, James is speaking to Christians who were not obeying the

Romans 4:1-5

commandments of Jesus. While Paul defined the one who “works” as a person seeking “what is due” (4:4) James defines “works” as the commands given to us by God as we will be “judged by the law of liberty.” Specifically, James is telling the brethren that they must be merciful to one another and care for one another’s needs. (James 2:13, 14-16, 4:17) These different contexts radically alter the meaning of the word “works,” but the inspired writers are not contradicting one another. In fact, Paul commands the same behavior that James commands in Galatians 5:13-15, 19-26.

In Summary...

To summarize Paul’s message in Romans 4:1-5, the apostle rebukes the Jewish thinking that salvation can be earned through the Law of Moses. Rather, righteousness has always come through trusting submission to God knowing that God can justify anyone.

How do you see yourself; like the Jews or like Abraham? The Jews thought they were righteous and God owed them salvation. Abraham thought he was “ungodly” and God owed him nothing. The Jews were disobedient to God in their arrogance. Abraham was obedient to God in humility. May we always seek to be “of the faith of Abraham” who is the “father of all who believe”! (4:16, 11)

Romans 4:1-5

How is Abraham “one who does not work”?

What is Paul’s definition of “one who works” in chapter 4?

Are James and Paul contradicting one another? Explain.

If Abraham has refused to obey the commands of God would he have been “credited” with righteousness?



Romans 7:14-23

IN PREPARATION

READ ROMANS 7-8

THINK ABOUT IT

THERE ARE TWO THINGS IN CONTRAST; SPIRITUAL AND FLESHLY.

WHAT IS THE DESIRE OF PAUL?

WHAT IS THE “LAW” IN THIS PASSAGE?

“For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in men, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.”

Honesty and empathy may be our greatest tools in understanding these words of the apostle Paul. This passage has been used to ascribe to Paul a Gnostic type of thinking as though he were saying that we are inherently evil. Some use this passage as an excuse to live in sin while Paul is making the opposite point. A passage that is supposed to instruct us and give us joy has instead been used to demean us-- God's creation.

Analyzing Romans 7

This chapter begins with a marriage illustration showing how one ceases to be under the Law of Moses and, instead, comes to be under the covenant of Christ. (7:1-4) He says that we were “bound” to the Law before Christ came and trapped in our sin, since the Law could not

Romans 7:14-23

forgive. (7:6) So was the Law sinful? “May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the Law.” (7:7) The Law of Moses brought the knowledge of sin to man. Having this knowledge allowed the people to see their failures and since they now knew of sin, they saw its increase in their lives. Paul describes the predicament: “I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died.” (7:9) The knowledge of sin brought the guilt and condemnation for the sin committed. The Law was good but it became something that brought death instead of life.

Struggle under the Law

Romans 7:14-23 discusses Paul’s (and all godly men’s) struggle under the Law of Moses. Paul knew the Law was good and right. However, he also realized that he fell short of keeping the Law perfectly. (3:23) He says, “For what I am doing, I do not understand.” (7:15) Despite his intention to keep the Law, from time to time he failed. What remedy was there under the Law? Paul says there was none and he was “sold into bondage to sin.” (7:14) He despised his condition. Although he purposed to obey completely, “the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.” (7:19) These words do not reflect a man who thinks it is ‘okay’ to live in sin. These words reveal a spiritually minded individual who is struggling to conquer sin, yet perfection is always out of reach.

Paul is then forced into a difficult situation to reconcile; “But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.” (7:20) Is this to be understood as an excuse to continue sinning? Apparently not because Paul laments that he became “a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.” (7:23) Rather, Paul seeks to bring these two “parts” together: On one side he wants to be perfect before God, on the other side he is in bondage to sin. How can they be reconciled? “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.” (7:24-25)

Romans 7:14-23

Empathizing with Paul

“with my flesh [I serve] the law of sin.” (7:25) What is the meaning of these words? Paul tells us in just a few moments that we must “not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” and “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” (8:4, 8) There is no approval of or excuse for sin to be found in Paul’s words. He is describing something that, in honesty, we all experience; struggle to overcome sin. We are tempted to do evil. We must choose to abstain. There are times that we fall short and sin. At those times we are to repent and pray and seek to overcome the next temptation. Paul simply states what we all already know to be true: It is sometimes difficult to do what we know to be right.

The mistake so many students make in this text is to confuse Paul’s admission of struggling with sin and occasional failure with permission, ambivalence, and casualness with sin. Throughout this text we have seen a distraught man who attempted to perfectly observe the Law of Moses and failed. Then this same man found hope in Jesus Christ. Although he continues to struggle sometimes, he knows that the Lord is merciful and will help him overcome. In fact, he says that he even has “a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (7:15) Find in Paul’s words the honesty and encouragement of a fellow soldier in the war against the flesh. Truthfully, these words are not as hard to understand as the hearts of those who misrepresent Paul’s exhortation to fight this good fight against fleshly desires.

Romans 7:14-23

What did the Law of Moses accomplish in Romans 7?

What are some of the words used that picture the distinction between what is spiritual and what is fleshly in this passage?

How does Paul overcome sin and win the struggle against the flesh?

Is Paul claiming to live sinfully in 7:25? What is he saying?



Romans 9:13-18

IN PREPARATION

READ ROMANS 9-10

THINK ABOUT IT

WHERE IS THE
QUOTATION IN 9:13
TAKEN FROM?

ON WHOM DOES THE
LORD “WILL” TO
HAVE MERCY?

WHO DOES GOD
DESIRE TO HARDEN?

“Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’ What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.’”

How could it be said that God hated Esau, the brother of Jacob? Yet, Paul uses this quotation to support his argument “it does not depend on the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” As with our other studies in Romans, this text must be understood in its context or it will not be properly understood at all!

Who are God’s people?

After leaving the chapter 7 discussion of the difficulties of living under the Law of Moses, Paul spends chapter 8 glorying in the relationship that God has with His children, the Christians. He ends the chapter expressing that no force “will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (8:39) Then the reader may question, ‘What about the Jews? What is their relationship to God now?’ Paul begins chapter 9 expressing his “great sorrow and unceasing grief” in his heart that the Jews are, for as long as they are apart from Christ, apart from God. (9:1-5) Has God’s word failed to deliver them to the Messiah? He answers, “it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.” (9:6) It takes more than lineage

Romans 9:13-18

from Abraham to be one of God's people. (9:7) In fact, throughout the early records we see that not all who were descended from Abraham were to be of God's chosen nation. Rather, those would be God's people through whom the promise was passed.

Children of Promise

The first example Paul uses to prove his point that the promise is more important than the lineage is the example of Isaac. Abraham had a son born to Hagar named Ishmael who was older than Isaac. However, God said, "through Isaac your descendants will be named." (9:7) It was not lineage that mattered but the promise of God. (9:8-9) Next, Paul considers the sons born to Rebekah: Jacob and Esau. Although Esau was older, it was written, "The older shall serve the younger." (9:12) The promise passed through Jacob. Many centuries later the book of Malachi was written speaking of judgment coming upon the Edomites, the descendants of Esau, for their sins. It is in that context that the Lord says, "Esau [the Edomites] I have hated." (Malachi 1:3) The Lord's wrath was against them. Paul uses this account to once again prove that the status of being "God's nation" was not focused on lineage but on the promise of God.

God has the right to determine which nation to exalt and which to bring down. The Lord told Pharaoh that he had been raised up "that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth." (9:17) Paul summarizes the lesson saying, "So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires." (9:18) Some today seem to believe that God is arbitrary in His decision on "whom He desires" to harden and have mercy on. Paul has already revealed who God desires to have mercy on in chapter 4-- the one who "believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness". (4:5, see Lesson 1 as well)

Paul continues his discussion by answering those who would find fault with God for choosing to glorify Christians instead of the Jews. God "endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction". (9:22) He called to them repeatedly to repent and turn to Him. (See Matthew 23:37.) They refused. He sent His son to them and they rejected Him. (John 1:11) Finally, He sent the apostles and the gospel to

Romans 9:13-18

them, but they would not hear. (10:16) Paul continues, “And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” (9:23-24) Those that reject the gospel can expect to be hardened to it in their hearts because “they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence...” (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11) However, those who love the truth whether Jew or Gentile, can “be called sons of the Living God.” (9:26)

Paul’s point in chapter 9 is simply stated near the end of the chapter: “What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over that stumbling stone, [Jesus.]” (9:30-32)

Romans 9:13-18 is a continuation of the discussion in chapter 4. It reveals to us the importance of God’s promises, the folly of believing in favor by lineage, and the unwillingness of the Jews to come to the Lord on His terms of faith. As Paul will go on to say, “they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.” (Romans 10:2-3) May we keep from making the same mistake!

Romans 9:13-18

How does chapter 9 relate to chapter 4? What key phrases tie the chapters together?

Is Paul arguing that the Lord arbitrarily decides who to harden and who to have mercy on? Explain your answer.

Who is the “us” of 9:23-24? Why did God choose to have mercy on “us”?

Compare 9:21 to 2 Timothy 2:20-21. How does the Lord prepare us for honor or dishonor? Is our free will involved? Explain.

1 John 5:16-17

IN PREPARATION

READ 1 JOHN 1-5

THINK ABOUT IT

WHY IS THE ONE WHO IS TO BE PRAYED FOR CALLED A “BROTHER” BUT JOHN HESITATES TO CALL THE OTHER SUCH A NAME?

WHY WOULD JOHN WANT TO LIMIT THE TYPES OF PRAYERS MADE FOR SOME INDIVIDUALS?

IF “ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS IS SIN,” HOW CAN THERE BE “SIN NOT LEADING TO DEATH”?

“If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.”

The apostle John puts a limit on what these brethren should be praying for. This is a concept unfamiliar to most of the religious world today but was very relevant during the life of John. But what does he mean? Why are there some things that the brethren should not be praying for? Is this text still relevant today?

Gnostic Heresies

The book of 1 John is focused on a false teaching that was destroying churches and costing souls; Gnosticism. These people believed that Jesus did not come to earth in the form of flesh, that all matter (including the flesh) is inherently sinful, and it was acceptable to live in sin. They based their teachings on supposed “special understanding” (gnostic comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means “knowledge”) from God. This teaching worked its way through the churches until John sought to confront it among the brethren who received the letter of 1 John. The words of 1 John 5:16-17 cannot be separated from the overall theme of the book. In fact, John seems to have meant these words to clear up any misunderstandings that may have been made in earlier comments.

Prayer and Sin

The immediate context of this passage begins in verse 14: “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if

1 John 5:16-17

we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.” Prayer is an important aspect of the Christian life. John is exhorting the brethren to pray regularly, especially in light of their current struggles. He continues, “And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him.” (5:15) The Lord is concerned for us and seeks to provide for our needs. The most important of those needs are spiritual in nature and we ought to be praying for them. (See James 1:5-6) Prayer is not something that is merely to benefit ourselves, however. We are also to pray for one another.

John says, “If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death.” (5:16a) Brethren are commanded to pray for one another regarding sin in James 5:16 as well.

What is a sin “not leading to death”? Throughout the book of John the apostle has been making a distinction between sin that can seem, at first glance, contradictory. He says, “If we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”. (1:8-10) While exhorting the brethren to live faithfully, John says that if they sin then Jesus will be an Advocate for them (assuming repentance, of course- Acts 8:20-24). However, John speaks of others who continually live in sin differently: “No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him... the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning.” (3:6, 8) It is clear that there are two groups under consideration: Christians who are seeking to live faithfully and those who have turned from the truth to live in sin-- namely, the Gnostics. Therefore, sin “not leading to death” in the book of 1 John has reference to sin that is repented of and not perpetual in nature.

John continues, “There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make

1 John 5:16-17

request for this.” (5:16b) The Gnostics were living in sin “leading to death” by continually forsaking the Lord and teaching their lies. Should the brethren be praying for them? John says (in reference to forgiveness) certainly not! The only hope for the Gnostics is to turn away from their false teachings and stop living in sin. John gives three reasons why there is a distinction to be made between praying for our brothers’ forgiveness and praying for the Gnostics:

“All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.” (5:17) John makes clear that he is not allowing for Christians to sin. All unrighteousness is sin. However, our Advocate will be there for us if we stumble as long as we are of a repentant heart and are seeking to serve Him. (2:1)

“We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps Him, and the evil one does not touch him.” (5:18) That is, Christians do not live in sin. The evil one does not have a grasp of children of God who are striving to please Him in truth. The same cannot be said of the Gnostics. The evil one has a solid grasp on them.

“We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” (5:19) There are two spiritual groups: Christians and the world. If the Gnostics are not of Christ then who do they belong to?

The letter ends with a jab at the supposed “special knowledge” of the Gnostics since Jesus “has given us an understanding” whereas that understanding is not in the false teachers. The purpose of 1 John 5:16-17 is to instruct the brethren concerning their prayer relationship with one another as opposed to the Gnostic teachers. ‘Pray for one another, but do not pray for the Gnostics in the same way.’

The lesson is not very different from that given in James 5. After instructing the Christians to support one another with prayer, James ends the book saying, “My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” (James 5:19-20) Such was the case with the Gnostics. They do not need to be treated as brothers but turned away from their sin. Let us remember the lesson today as well.

1 John 5:16-17

What is the main purpose of the letter of I John? Give a few texts in the book that support your conclusion.

John speaks of Christians relationship to one another extensively in I John. What is the general thought behind their interactions with one another?

Why would John seek to make a distinction between those who are faithfully striving to serve the Lord and the Gnostics?

According to John, Christians do not sin (5:18) but Gnostics do (3:6). What does he mean? Don't we all fall short from time to time?

1 Peter 3:18-20

IN PREPARATION

READ 1 PETER 3-4

THINK ABOUT IT

COMPARE THE NASB TO THE NKJV RENDERINGS OF THIS TEXT. WHAT DIFFERENCES DO YOU SEE?

WHAT IS PETER'S MOTIVATION IN THE PASSAGE?

WHY SPEAK OF PAST OCCURRENCES TO THESE BRETHERN?

“For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the Spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits now in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water.”

The NASB 95's needless addition of the word “now” before the words “in prison” is not helpful when seeking the proper understanding of Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:18-20. The NKJV leaves the text as simply, “the spirits in prison.” The text is difficult but is further confused by commentator's inability to “see the forest for the trees.” The difficult language used by this apostle can be cleared up by seeing the main point being communicated and the parallel being made to the times of the writer with the days of Noah.

Peter's Comparison

These verses are found within a section in which Peter is comparing the days of Noah to the days that he is writing. There are six parallels that are made.

Disobedient People (3:20, 4:1-5)

The people of Noah's day “were disobedient.” (3:20) The same was true in Peter's day. The people are so sinful that “they are surprised that you do not run with them into the same dissipation, and they malign you” (4:4)

End Nearing (3:20, 4:7)

In Noah's day “the patience of God kept waiting, during the

1 Peter 3:18-20

construction of the ark”. (3:20) Outside of that vessel, the end of God’s patience was upon the people. Peter says the same of his own day: “The end of all things is near”. (4:7)

Spiritual Bondage (3:19, 4:6)

The people of Noah’s day are described as “spirits *now* in prison.” (3:19) As was mentioned, the word “now” does not appear in the original text which is why the NASB italicizes the word. This time-stamp is misleading to the reader. It is not that these people are imprisoned *now*, Peter is saying that these individuals were imprisoned *then*-- to sin. Paul uses this type of language when he speaks of being “slaves to sin”. (Romans 6:17) Isaiah used similar language when explaining that the Messiah would “proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners”. (Isaiah 61:1) The people of Noah’s day were imprisoned to their sin. Peter uses a parallel statement to describe the condition of those who rejected the gospel in his day: “For the gospel has for this purpose been preached even to those who are dead... [that] they may live”. (4:6) Both of these phrases show the spiritual condition of people in rebellion to God.

Preached To (3:19, 4:6)

The disobedient people of Noah’s day were not left without a witness to the truth. We read that “[Jesus] went and made proclamation” to them. (3:19) In what manner exactly this was done we are not told. It is only recounted by Peter to reinforce the parallel with his own day: “For the gospel has for this purpose been preached”. (4:6)

Message Preached by the Spirit (3:19, 4:6)

The preaching that was done by Jesus during the days of Noah was done through the Spirit. Peter says that Christians have been “made alive in the [S]pirit; in which also He went and made proclamation...” (3:18-19) The word should be capitalized since it is through the Holy Spirit that we have been made alive and through which Jesus was preached during the days of Noah. The term is reused in 4:6: “the gospel has been preached... [that] they may live in the [S]pirit according to the will of God.” The recurrence of this phrase shows that parallel that Peter was making.

1 Peter 3:18-20

Few Obeyed (3:20, 3:21)

“Few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water” during the days of Noah. How few chose to obey the Spirit’s message! “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”. (3:21) Sadly, too few obey the message today!

A Simple Concept

We can, then, paraphrase 1 Peter 3:18-20 in this manner; ‘Jesus died for us in the flesh to bring us to God but was made alive by the Spirit. The time we live in is comparable to the days of Noah in which Jesus preached to those people through the Spirit before their end came while God patiently waited during the construction of the ark. Very few were saved.’ Then immediately the comparison moves into our situation of having obeyed in the waters of baptism.

Although the words of 1 Peter 3:18-20 can seem difficult upon first reading, the concept that Peter is making is a simple one: Do not make the same mistake the people in the days of Noah did. Although we are relatively few in number, we must choose to serve the Lord to the salvation of our souls because the end is near!

1 Peter 3:18-20

What parallel is Peter making in 1 Peter 3:18-4:7?

Why might “spirits in prison” be a comparable statement to “those who are dead”? (3:19, 4:6) What are some other passages that use language like this?

God’s patience was shown in waiting to flood the earth while the ark was being built. How is God’s patience being shown today?

Some claim this text is teaching that people can be saved after death even if they did not obey during life. Why would this doctrine contradict the rest of Scripture?

Mark 3:28-29

IN PREPARATION

READ MARK 3,
MATTHEW 12, LUKE 12

THINK ABOUT IT

HOW ARE SINS
FORGIVEN? HOW
WOULD THE SIN OF
BLASPHEMING
JESUS BE
FORGIVEN?

IS JESUS ALLOWING
FOR BLASPHEMING
THE FATHER OR
HIMSELF?

ARE ALL SINS
ETERNAL? WHAT IS
THE DISTINCTION
THAT JESUS IS
MAKING?

“Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin...”

This is often referred to as “the unforgivable sin.” Speculations abound regarding these words with all types of views about what it means to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. However, most of these views fail to consider the context in which these words were spoken. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record this same statement. Although we will be using Mark’s account as the primary study, we also understand the need to have an interpretation that harmonizes with Matthew and Luke’s accounts as well.

Jesus Under Attack

As Mark introduces this section we find that Jesus was being slandered by “the scribes who came down from Jerusalem.” (3:22) Seeing His miracles, they said, “He is possessed by Beazelbul” and “He casts out the demons by the rulers of the demons.” (3:22) The Lord sought to answer such terrible accusations concerning His work. He asks, “How can Satan cast out Satan?” (3:23) To illustrate the folly of believing such a thing He considers a human kingdom. “If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.” (3:24) Every nation understands this principle. Also, “if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.” (3:25) Even lords over men understand that there must be unity in their houses. So Jesus concludes, “If Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but he is finished!” (3:26) The same rule that applies to kingdoms and houses applies to

Mark 3:28-29

Satan. So what is the proper explanation of why Jesus is casting out demons? Jesus says, "But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house." (3:27) In this parable it is Satan who is the "strong man." The Lord seeks to plunder his "house," that is, Jesus seeks to take Satan's power over men away from him. By casting out demons Jesus is "binding" the strong man and preparing to plunder him!

Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

It is at this point that Mark has Jesus speak the words, "all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin". (3:28-29) What connection do these words have with the context? Mark tells us that Jesus spoke these words "because they were saying, 'He has an unclean spirit.'" (3:20) In other words, Mark says that this passage is directly related to the charge leveled against the Lord. Certainly the scribes were attacking Jesus. However, Jesus seems to be coming to the strong defense, not of Himself, but of the Holy Spirit. While Jesus was working these miracles, apparently the Spirit was also involved. (See also Luke 4:1, 14) By attacking the miracles that were being performed they were blaspheming the Spirit. What else were the people to receive as witness of the truth? God had sent the prophets but they were rejected. God sent His Son, but His Son was also being rejected. The Jews in particular were running out of time to heed the truth. By rejecting the signs being done they were blaspheming the last witness to be given; the Holy Spirit. Any sin can condemn a person (Romans 6:23). Any sin can only be forgiven through repentance. (Acts 17:30) So, why is this sin an "eternal sin"? These individuals witnessing these miracles were rejecting the source of truth for man and the last One to testify of it. There would be no other messenger sent to them. Thus, this sin would have eternal consequences as they would have no way remedying it. One may have blasphemed against Jesus, but when Jesus revealed the works of the Spirit one could come to repentance and be saved through witnessing the miracles. (See Mark 16:20) Thus, blaspheming Jesus was something that could be forgiven. But the Spirit is the proof of all that was taught. (Hebrews 2:3-4) Rejecting Him has no

Mark 3:28-29

remedy, but only a fearful expectation of judgment from God.

Harmony Among the Gospels

The accounts of Matthew and Mark confirm that this is the correct interpretation by placing the comments in contexts that support a consistent understanding of “blaspheming the Holy Spirit.”

Matthew 12:32

Before recording these words Matthew also records Jesus casting out a demon. (12:22) The Pharisees then say, “This man casts out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons.” (12:24) After similarly teaching them as found in Mark’s account Jesus says, “Therefore I say to you...” (12:31) Matthew shows that these words were directly connected to the attacks on Jesus regarding His miracles, just as Mark’s account explains.

Luke 12:10

Luke gives this statement of Jesus in a very different context than Matthew and Luke, but this change of context supports the interpretation that “blaspheming the Spirit” refers to rejecting the witnessed miracles. The apostles were going to be persecuted. (12:4) They would be taken before men and tried and, sometimes, condemned for their message. However, Jesus says to them, “everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God.” (12:8) It is a moment later that Jesus tells them of the sin of “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.” (12:10) Note that immediately afterwards Jesus tells the apostles of the miraculous inspiration they will receive for their defense because “the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (12:12) Their persecutors would witness miracles at the apostles hands! If those people reject the miracles then they have rejected the Holy Spirit- the last messenger to be given! While the apostles will ultimately be saved to a heavenly hope their persecutors will not. So, who is to be pitied? Not these servants, though they may die.

Mark 3:28-29

Why does Mark say that Jesus spoke these words?

What does it mean to 'blaspheme the Holy Spirit' in these passages?

How do Matthew and Luke reveal harmony in interpreting this passage?

What are some of the other views you have heard about blaspheming the Holy Spirit? Do these views consider the context given by Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Why or why not?



Luke 16:1-9

IN PREPARATION

READ LUKE 16

THINK ABOUT IT

WOULD GOD
COMMEND A MAN
FOR BEHAVING
UNRIGHTEOUSLY?

DO YOU WANT TO
SHARE IN THE
ETERNAL HOME OF
THOSE WHO ARE
DESCRIBED BY
JESUS AS
“UNRIGHTEOUS”?

WHAT WAS THE
RESPONSE OF THE
HEARERS TO THIS
PARABLE?

“Now He was also saying to the disciples, ‘There was a rich man who had a manager, and this manager was reported to him as squandering his possessions. And he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an accounting of your management, for you can no longer be manager.’ The manager said to himself, ‘What shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig; I am ashamed to beg. I know what I shall do, so that when I am removed from my management people will welcome me into their homes.’ And he summoned each one of his master’s debtors, and he began saying to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of oil.’ And he said to him, ‘Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.’ Then he said to another, ‘And how much do you owe?’ And he said, ‘A hundred measures of wheat.’ He said to him, ‘Take your bill, and write eighty.’ And his master praised the unrighteous manager because he had acted shrewdly; for the sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light. And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings.”

The Parable of the Unjust Steward is typically considered the most difficult parable that is recorded in the teachings of the Lord. However, most of the difficulties with the text result not from the words of Jesus but from the baggage that is brought to the text in preconceived ideas about who the characters represent. Since Luke is the only writer to record this parable for us we must solely allow the context he places it in to determine the lesson Jesus was teaching. In this instance, the end can help us to better understand the beginning.

Luke 16:1-9

Shrewdness in Survival

To summarize the parable, a rich man's financial manager had been caught irresponsibly handling his master's money. The rich man intended to fire him. In order to secure a job for later he called the rich man's debtors to him and cut their debts so as to make friends of them. The rich man found out and, instead of being angry with the manager, praised him for being shrewd because the rich man was also a shrewd individual.

Jesus gives the lesson, "make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it fails, they will receive you into the eternal dwellings." (16:9)

Preconceived Ideas of Many

People often identify the rich man as being God. This leads to struggles with why God would be seen praising a man for lying, cheating, and stealing. In fact, just a few verses later Jesus says, "He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much." (16:10) Why would we force an interpretation on the identity of the rich man that contradicts what we know about God through Jesus' words? The rich man is not God. God would not praise such evil or reward it.

Many identify the "eternal dwellings" of 16:9 with heaven. However, the term is not necessarily a positive one. Context must determine if someone should expect heavenly dwellings or the dwellings of hell. Jesus is not speaking positively about the eternal fate of this swindler nor of those who behave like him. Jesus is, in fact, being a bit sarcastic regarding individuals who would act like this. Making friends through "unrighteousness" will lead to failure: "make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteousness, so that when it fails..." (16:9a) He then points out that all who behave in this way will share the same fate: "they will receive you into the eternal dwellings." (16:9b) Do you want to be in the eternal dwellings of money-loving swindlers? I do not. Jesus is suggesting that we do not follow their path. How do we know that this is His purpose? The following passages make it clear.

Luke 16:1-9

Understanding the Lesson

Jesus is directing this parable and the following statements towards the Pharisees. Luke records, "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at him. And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.'" (16:14-15) This entire section, Luke 16:1-15, is dealing with the love of money. The Pharisees were "shrewd" individuals who valued shrewdness in others, just as the rich man did. Jesus gives several lessons against their greed:

They will share an eternal dwelling with other unrighteous ones. (16:9)

They have been unfaithful in their use of what they had been given, financially and regarding their spiritual influence, and God would hold them accountable. (16:10-12)

Like the unjust manager, they were trying to serve two masters. (16:13)

Their hearts were set on physical things (money and authority) and not on spiritual truth. (16:15)

The Parable of the Unjust Steward is a pointed parable meant to condemn the love of money among the Pharisees. The lesson of our Lord is clear as long as we do not force unnecessary interpretations onto the text. May we always seek to remember the Lord's teaching and strive to be lovers of God rather than lovers of wealth.

Luke 16:1-9

Jesus makes a distinction between the behavior of the “sons of this age” and the “sons of light.” Was the manager a ‘son of this age’ or a ‘son of light’? What about the rich man?

What two figures in this parable are often misinterpreted which causes most of the confusion about Jesus’ point?

Who was Jesus primarily speaking about in this parable? How did those individuals react to His message? Why?

What are the “eternal dwellings” of the “unrighteous”? How is Jesus using sarcasm to teach an important point?



Matthew 24:34-36

IN PREPARATION

READ MATTHEW 24,
LUKE 17, LUKE 21,
MARK 13

THINK ABOUT IT

THE WORD
“AGE” (24:3) HAS
OFTEN BEEN
POORLY
TRANSLATED AS
“WORLD”. DOES
THAT MATTER IN
THE CONTEXT?

MARK 13 ONLY HAS
TWO QUESTIONS
(INSTEAD OF THREE)
YET INCLUDES
ALMOST ALL OF THE
SAME INFORMATION
AS MATTHEW 24.
(SEE ESPECIALLY
MARK 13:30-32)

“Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away. But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.”

If the difficulty of a passage can be judged by the amount of misunderstanding rooted in the text then Matthew 24 may be the most difficult text in the bible. In truth, the chapter is straightforward, albeit the passage contains some apocalyptic language that the Jews handled more regularly than modern bible students. The timeline for the events prophesied in Matthew 24 is an important key for our understanding of the entire chapter.

Considering the Temple

This section of Matthew is concerning the sin and coming judgment of the Jewish nation. Chapter 23 records seven woes of the Lord towards the leaders of the people and ends with Jesus lamenting the things that “will come upon this generation” due to their sin. (23:36) He then cries out to the city, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” (23:37) Matthew then records the disciples showing the beauty of the temple to Jesus. “And He said to them, ‘Do you not see all these things? Truly I say to you, not one stone here will be left upon another, which will not be torn down.’” (24:2) The disciples are next pictured coming to Jesus inquiring about when these things will happen, understanding that this will mark “the end of the age.” (24:3) As Matthew

Matthew 24:34-36

often does, this section of the book is a compilation of related teachings of the Lord about the issue at hand. Specifically, the following text concerns the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. Ahead of this calamity there will be false messiahs (24:4-5), wars and rumors of wars (24:6-8), persecution against Christians that will cause many to fall away (24:9-10), false prophets (24:11), and the gospel will spread throughout the world (24:14). When the city is being taken the temple will witness an abomination prophesied by Daniel (24:15) and at that point all Christians are to flee to the mountains (24:16-20). The destruction of the city would be terrible to behold (24:21). Using apocalyptic language similar to that found in Isaiah 13:10 and Ezekiel 32:8, the fall of the nation is promised to take place. (24:22-30). There will then be a new nation firmly established before the Lord; a spiritual nation that is “His elect” which are gathered (spiritually) to Him. (24:31; see also Hebrews 12:22-24) In the verses following, Jesus gives the disciples more details on “when” this will happen.

A Narrowing Timeline

The Lord says, “Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place.” (24:34, also 23:36) Many today seek to explain away these words or claim that the Lord changed His mind. However, Jesus is basing this promise upon the rejection of the Jews (see chapter 23). Nothing about their collective demeanor changed towards Jesus in the following decades. Paul certainly continues to see them as rebellious towards the Messiah. (Romans 10:1-4) Using a common phrase of the time, Jesus says, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away.” (24:35) He used a similar phrase in Matthew 5:17-18: “Do not think I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. 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.” The phrase is meant to affirm a promise. Jesus was not an enemy of the Law of Moses, He was its completion. It was not going to take “until heaven and earth” passed away for Him to fulfill it. Rather, He is saying that the Law will be fulfilled-- and that is more sure than heaven and earth continuing. How could we accuse the Lord of ‘changing His mind’ or ‘being unable to

Matthew 24:34-36

accomplish' what He said was more sure than heaven and earth? "This generation," though, is the most specific the Lord could be. He says, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone." (24:36) For whatever reason, Jesus says that His knowledge of the exact day and hour that this judgment would take place has not been granted to Him or the angels. Only the Father knew. Jesus exhorts the disciples to stay prepared in light of this: "Therefore be on alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming." (24:42, see also 24:30)

Luke's accounts of this information give more details that the disciples were to look for. Jesus says this will happen where "the *eagles will be gathered." (Luke 17:37- *Some translations read "vultures," but "eagle" is a better rendering and likely refers to the Roman seal bearing this image.) He also said, "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then recognize her desolation is near." (Luke 21:20)

The Fulfillment of Matthew 24

In A.D. 70, the city of Jerusalem was surrounded and cut off by the Roman army. Some reports claim that over 2 million Jews were killed in the ensuing siege. With such a brutal scene it would be expected that the Christians were also killed. However, there are no reports of a single Christian being slain; they had all fled the city when the Roman armies were approaching. They went by way of the mountains which took the greatest amount of time to seal up by the Romans. Jesus' words were listened to by the disciples. Although they did not know the "day and hour," they knew the destruction was to be within one generation of the Lord's murder and they knew the signs to look for!

Matthew 24:34-36 puts the entire chapter into a timeline that gives us, as bible students nearly 2,000 years later, the ability to analyze the text and place it into a historical context that harmonizes away our difficulties in interpretation.

Matthew 24:34-36

How do Jesus' words in Matthew 23 connect with the discussion in chapter 24?

What do Jesus' disciples question Him about in Matthew 24? Why do some translations have the word "world" instead of "age" in 24:3?

Why do some claim that Jesus did return in "this generation"? (24:34) What assurance does Jesus give that He would return within that timeline?

Jesus gives examples to exhort the disciples to remain alert and ready so that they will notice the signs to flee. What examples does He use? (24:37-51)

2 Thessalonians 2:3-10

IN PREPARATION

READ 2
THESSALONIANS 2

THINK ABOUT IT

THE CHRISTIANS BELIEVED THIS “COMING” OF JESUS COULD HAVE ALREADY TAKEN PLACE. SURELY THEY DID NOT THINK THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO OVERLOOK THE FINAL JUDGMENT! (2:2)

THE THESSALONIANS WERE FAMILIAR WITH THE TOPIC PAUL IS WRITING ABOUT. (2:5, 6)

“Let no one deceive you, for it will not come unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God. Do you not remember that while I was still with you, I was telling you these things? And you know what restrains him now, so that in his time he will be revealed. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring an end by the appearance of His coming; that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders, and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.”

The last study revealed the importance of identifying which “coming of our Lord” a passage is referring to in its context. Matthew 24 speaks of the Lord’s coming judgment against Jerusalem as “the Son of Man coming” (Matthew 24:30). What is Paul referring to in this text?

Which “Coming” is Paul Discussing?

Certainly Paul was speaking of the final return of Jesus to judge the world in I Thessalonians 4:15-17. That “coming of the Lord” would not be able to be missed-- The Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, the dead in Christ will rise, and then the living will be caught up together with Him to live forever. Yet, when Paul speaks to the Thessalonians in the second letter some were “disturbed” by hearing that “the day of the Lord has come.” (2:2) It

2 Thessalonians 2:3-10

seems unlikely that these brethren thought they had missed the shout of the Lord, the dead being raised, and being caught up to heaven. Rather, we find a striking similarity of language found between Jesus' words in Matthew 24 concerning the destruction of Jerusalem and the things Paul speaks of in 2 Thessalonians 2. Consider how Paul begins the chapter: "Now we request you, brethren, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to Him..." (2:1) Do these words demand that a physical gathering to Jesus is under consideration? Jesus used this language in reference to a spiritual gathering to take place at the destruction of the temple: "He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds". (Matthew 24:31, see also Joel 3:9) Paul then proceeds to speak of the source of their current "shaken" composure: "a spirit or a message or a letter as if from us". (2:2) It seems much more sensible to believe that these brethren were thinking that the Lord had already come against Jerusalem than that the final judgment had taken place secretly.

"The Man of Lawlessness"

Paul speaks of "the man of lawlessness" who must come before the Lord's judgment (against Jerusalem) takes place. Note the many characteristics of this individual: He "opposes and exalts himself... he takes his seat in the temple of God, displaying himself as being God." (2:4) Jesus also spoke of a blasphemy taking place in the temple before it was destroyed. (Matthew 24:15, see also Daniel 9:27) At the time of writing Paul says something "restrains him now" and "is already at work". (2:6-7) This was not an individual who would appear thousands of years later but was already alive! The "lawless one will be revealed" and his "coming is in accord with the activity of Satan". (2:8, 9) Although the "lawless one" did not know it, his work was coinciding with the efforts of Satan to deceive the Jews. Josephus records all types of terrible and unnatural occurrences when the final days of the city were nearing. Eventually, "the Lord will slay [him] with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming." (2:8) Although this one would be fighting against Jerusalem as God has decreed, he would be punished for his own sins and wickedness. Not him alone, but the entire empire that labored for him.

2 Thessalonians 2:3-10

What individual had all of the traits that Paul describes? Since we are not privy to all that was said by Paul in person (2:5) we may never be certain, but one seems to fit the description well: Titus, the commander during the siege of Jerusalem, son of the emperor Vespasian, and future emperor of Rome. He pitched his camp for the attack of the city between Jerusalem and the sea as prophesied by Daniel (Daniel 11:45), set up an idol in the temple, and claimed to be a god.

A Roman commander would fit the description of Paul well, especially since Jesus spoke of the coming judgment with reference to “eagles” gathering, the seal of Rome. (Luke 17:37) Jesus also said the abomination was near “when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies.” (Luke 21:20) Titus is the person who brought those armies to the city.

We should remember the fate of the Roman empire in prophecy as well. Paul says that “the lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming.” (2:8) This language is quite similar to that used to describe the judgment of God against Rome: “From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron... And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, ‘King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.’” (Revelation 19:15) Although Rome was an instrument used by God to destroy Jerusalem, that empire had sins of its own to answer for. Jesus was coming to destroy Jerusalem and later He would come to destroy the Romans.

Summary of 2 Thessalonians 2

Paul assures the brethren that the judgment of the Jews has not yet taken place. Before that happens, a lawless one will come and defame the temple and set himself up as a god. The Lord will deal with him in due time. This one will be working simultaneously as the lying signs from Satan are being committed. All of those who believe these lies will be doomed, being sent a delusion since they did not love the truth (in Christ). But praise be to God that you have obeyed the gospel. Stand firm in the love of truth!

2 Thessalonians 2:3-10

In light of verses 5-7, does it seem that this lawless one is thousands of years away or will be revealed soon?

What are the characteristics of the “lawless one”?

In the context, who are those who did not love the truth and would receive the strong delusion that lead them to judgment?

Name a few times in which God was said to be ‘coming in judgment’ that did not refer to the final judgment. How can we tell which is which?



Revelation 20:1-10

IN PREPARATION

READ REVELATION
19-20

THINK ABOUT IT

THE JUDGMENT
AGAINST THE BEAST
IN CHAPTER 19 WAS
ETERNAL BUT
SATAN WAS ONLY
BOUND FOR 1,000
YEARS.

THE REWARD IN
VERSES 4-5 WERE
MEANT ONLY FOR
THOSE WHO HAD
DIED DUE TO THE
PERSECUTION OF
THE SAINTS.

THE FINAL
JUDGMENT TAKES
PLACE
IMMEDIATELY
FOLLOWING THE
ATTACK OF GOG
AND MAGOG.

“Then I say an angel coming down from heaven, holding the key of the abyss and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the dragon, the serpent of old, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; and he threw him into the abyss, and shut it and sealed it over him, so that he would not deceive the nations any longer until the thousand years were completed; after these things he must be released for a short time. Then I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark on their forehead and on their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed. This is the first resurrection.

Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with Him for a thousand years. When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will come out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like the sand of the seashore. And they came up on the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, and fire came down from heaven and devoured them. And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

It would require a full study of Revelation as well as more space to satisfactorily explain these verses. However, because this difficult text is discussed so often it is fitting

Revelation 20:1-10

for us to spend a few moments analyzing it. Many fanciful interpretations are given to this book that completely ignore the suffering of the Christians in the day it was written, the numerous sayings indicating that “the time is near” (1:3) for these things to occur, and John’s calling of himself “your brother and fellow partaker in the tribulation” (1:9) to the people receiving the letter. This book is speaking a message of victory to those who were suffering at the hands of God’s enemies (the Jews and Romans) since God will judge the wicked. Revelation 19, in apocalyptic language, is describing the fall of Rome. Chapter 20 explains the fall of Satan.

Satan’s Final Judgment

Rome had been raised up to do the will of Satan. (Revelation 13) Rome will be destroyed. But what about Satan? Satan is “bound” by an angel “for a thousand years.” (20:1-2) This is in contrast with the beast (Rome) who was thrown to the “lake of fire... forever and ever.” (20:10) Satan is “bound” so as to be unable to “deceive the nations” for this thousand years, which is a figurative period of time representing a great duration. However, at the end of this thousand years he “must be released for a short time” (20:3) and, just as he raised up Rome to war against the church, he will raise up another state (figuratively called Gog and Magog) to attack the church again. (20:7-9) However, when he has “surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city” (20:9) God will come to destroy his work once again. However, this time he will be “thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone... [and] be tormented day and night forever and ever.” (20:10) The message to the Christians is this; Rome is going to be judged soon. Satan will be bound for a while, but will rise again in the distant future to attack the church once more. However, God will bring a final judgment against him at that time.

The Victorious Dead

Many Christians were killed by the persecution of Rome. God is proud of them for holding their faith to the end. Therefore, John sees “the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony” in a glorious state. They did not lose their lives for nothing. After Rome is pictured as falling, “they came to life and reigned with

Revelation 20:1-10

Christ for a thousand years.” (20:4) This cannot be a literal resurrection as all of the dead in Christ will be raised at once on the final judgment day (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17) unless the purpose is to contrast their situation with all others-- which is one possible meaning of verse 5: “The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were completed”. John exhorts all of the brethren living under the Roman attacks to be willing to die if necessary: “Blessed and holy is the one who has part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power... [they] will reign with Him for a thousand years.” (20:6)

Note that this “thousand years” of their reigning with Christ is the same as the “thousand years” that Satan is bound before he is released. It seems that this image of victory is given to show the church that survives on earth through their sacrifice. For a thousand years the church has life because of their willingness to die. This is an encouragement to those who were suffering. (2:10) However, when Satan is released again “for a short while” to attack the church, the brethren will have to once again choose to die (if need be) for their. The church of that generation will have to stand by its own choice and no longer on the choices of the faithful dead under the Roman persecutions.

John gives no signs or indications that could be used to recognize “Gog and Magog”. This is in accordance with the will of God. We are to always be ready to meet our God. After these things the final judgment will be upon all mankind. “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it... And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne... death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them, and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (20:11-15) Are you prepared to face God at His throne?

Revelation 20:1-10

In what way was Satan “bound” for a thousand years? What was he unable to do any longer? What was he going to do when released?

Were all of the Christians going to “reign” with Christ in verse 4-5? Who is being referred to?

John speaks of the “beloved city” in 20:9. It is on earth (as that is where Satan attacks it) and is described in more detail in 21:10 ff. What is it?

Does John give clues that can be used to identify Gog and Magog? If not, why not?

This book belongs to:
