

## **Addressing Bible Difficulties**

**By Dan Jensen (2023)**

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “basics” series first. It can be found on my website.)

This essay is intended to help new Christians (or Christians who have not had the chance to study this issue) handle the passages in the Bible that at first glance appear to be very problematic. The failure to understand these texts can often lead to a lot of doubt and confusion for far too many true Christians. Some even have long phases of near despair. This is so unfortunate because we do have extremely good explanations for these passages. This does not mean that we can explain every verse in the Bible; we cannot. But, it does mean that in an overall sense, we have very solid explanations for these problematic passages.

As was stated in the first book of my “basics” series (chapter 5), we are not here dealing with the confusing passages found in the Bible. No one really knows what these passages are talking about and there are not that many of them. Most of them would probably be easily explained if we better understood the cultural background behind them. Many others are talking about the end times and we probably won't fully understand them until those events are occurring before our eyes. Most people understand this and so these verses should not cause you too much anxiety. I am seeking to address in this essay the many verses that at first glance do not seem very difficult to interpret, but are very hard to understand as to why God inspired them at all.

The first thing that needs to be said is that it is so important to understand that God is not obligated to make His word conform to whatever culture you come from. No matter who you are, even if you were raised in a truly godly Christian home, the Bible will always challenge your long-held assumptions on many subjects. And for those not

raised in believing homes, like myself, the Bible will often seem utterly shocking at first. When the Vikings were beginning to convert, they could not understand why the Bible talked so much about peace and love. To many in American culture today, they have the opposite struggle. They cannot understand why there is so much violence in the Bible and why a lot of it is commanded by God Himself. Many cultures down through the ages have found the Song of Solomon to be positively scandalous. Some cultures even go so far as to circumcise women so that they cannot feel pleasure in sex. Whereas many in Western cultures today, see the Bible's sexual ethic as oppressive and bigoted. If Christianity genuinely transcends all cultures because it is the one true worldview, then plainly it is not going to be easy for any non-Christian culture to swallow a great deal of what it says at first.

With all that in mind, most of the time, if we can force ourselves to put our cultural assumptions aside for a moment, what the Bible has to say actually makes a great deal of sense. I cannot give every example of this in this essay, but we can look at two here. Let's look at the example of all the violence in the Bible as our first example. The initial thing that needs to be said about this is that the Bible is mostly history. God takes the history of His people very seriously. While God provides us with many teachings from His word, God loves to give us history in order to be inspired by the way He worked in and through His people. But the history of God's people is part of the larger history of the world. And the history of the world is the history of people after the fall. The fall was catastrophic according to the Bible (Romans 8). Therefore, that history by its nature is ugly and brutal.

How is it a good thing for God to candy-coat this in His word? Many other religions try to say that evil doesn't exist. They say it is an illusion. But we all know deep down that it is not an illusion. The fact that the Bible is honest about this points to its truthfulness. Always remember that one of the most basic principles of biblical interpretation is that just because the Bible records something does not mean that it is condoning that something. Often the Bible records things to show us how evil humans can be apart from the grace of God, including the actions of the followers of God. And this explains a

lot of the violence in the Bible. I understand that it doesn't explain all of it, but it does explain a great deal of it.

The next example is the fact that the Bible often does not use precise language. The Bible often uses poetry; figures of speech; hyperbole; it rounds numbers; the authors often paraphrase things; and it often excludes details that the author did not feel were necessary for his purposes. This can be especially confusing to people in Western cultures today when the Bible is giving history (and the Bible gives a lot of history as we have seen). In Western culture today, history is supposed to be written in an extremely detailed fashion. So, we often assume that all history throughout all time was written this way. But, that simply isn't true. And it absolutely isn't true for biblical history. You may ask, "Well then, how can I know when to take the Bible literally and when not to do so?" The answer is that we use common sense. We interpret things literally unless we have really good reasons not to do so. And even when we take a non-literal interpretation, we must still use common sense. I discuss this principle further in the first book of my "basics" series (chapter 5).

With all that said, don't be surprised when one biblical author describes an event one way, and another biblical author describes it another way with different details. Now, if the two narratives blatantly contradicted each other, we would indeed have a problem. Most of the time however, one includes certain details that the other doesn't, and leaves out other details that the other author includes. And sometimes in our current good translations, there are what appear to be blatant contradictions over very minor details, something we will discuss next.

Moving on from the cultural issue, the next highly important principle to understand is that while God's original word was inerrant, none of our translations of that word are inerrant today. This at first can really freak some Christians out, but there is nothing to worry about here. God only inspired His prophets and apostles to write His word. Those who made copies of His word, and the translators of His word, are not prophets or apostles. And in the ancient world, it was impossible to keep the originals of any

document preserved forever. You may ask, “Ok, but then why didn’t God do a miracle and preserve all the originals?” This question fundamentally misunderstands the nature of miracles. For God to do this, He would have to perform a perpetual miracle. God certainly has the power to do so, but miracles by their nature are supposed to be rare occurrences where God shows His mighty power or authenticates His prophets/apostles or both. What God did do is make sure that the gist of His word would always be preserved in the copies and good translations of His word. You may be saying about now, “The gist? The gist! That’s all we get is the gist?! You said in book one of your ‘basics’ series that the doctrine of inerrancy is hugely important. And now you are telling me that all we get is the gist?” Trust me when I say that none of this is as confusing as it sounds at first.

The doctrine of inerrancy is so important because it is taught by the Bible itself. Therefore, if God says that His original word was without error, we must believe that, end of story. It doesn’t matter that we no longer have the original errorless documents. We don’t have a lot of things before us that the Bible talks about. The Bible talks about the life of Abraham. But I’ve never met Abraham. And neither have you. The Bible says that Jesus walked on water. But I did not see that occur. And neither did you. The same is true with the original documents of Scripture. We don’t need them in front of us to believe that they existed and were without error because God says they were without error.

You may be saying, “You are arguing in a circle! You are saying that you know that the Bible was originally without error because the Bible tells you so!” But I am not arguing in a circle at all. All true Christians know that the Bible is the word of God in a general sense from the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. By *general sense* here, I mean that the Spirit tells us that the Bible is the word of God in an overarching sense. It could have minor errors in it here and there, but if we go by its general teachings, we will not be led astray because it has been inspired by God. You may say, “How on earth can God err?” I am not saying that God can err. He most certainly cannot. That is common sense. What I am saying is that He could have given His perfect, errorless word to His prophets

and apostles, and they could have erred here and there in their presentation of that word.

You may say, "Ok, but if they could err in their presentation of the word, how am I supposed to know what to believe from the Bible or not. What is error and what is not error?" We can know this by going by the things that are taught repeatedly in the Bible. If the prophets and apostles repeatedly erred over the same topics, then yes the Bible would be an unreliable document and could not be considered God's word in any sense. And if the copyists and translators of God's word could utterly botch God's word, then those copies and translations would also be worthless. But, we know from the Spirit of God that this is not the case. Now this does not mean that there has never been a bad copy or translation. There have been many. But they are always recognized as such by the people of God.

Therefore, where the Bible teaches something repeatedly, we can be sure that this is a doctrine God wants us to know about. When any such doctrine is not taught with absolute clarity, we are to come to the best conclusion we can with the help of the Spirit, while never condemning our brothers and sisters in Christ for having a different conclusion. We can certainly debate and discuss these differing conclusions. We can even say that we think a certain conclusion is dangerous and we feel really, really confident that it is not what the Bible is actually teaching. But unless we are certain, we must not condemn our brothers and sisters in Christ as heretics over these points.

An example of this would be the doctrine of predestination. Predestination is talked about repeatedly in the Bible. Therefore, it is a doctrine we should try our best to understand. However, the Bible is not absolutely clear on this doctrine. There are passages that seem to lean in a Reformed direction, and there are passages that seem to lean in a non-Reformed direction. We must do our best to try to harmonize these various passages, while not condemning our brothers and sisters in Christ for coming to different conclusions than us. This doesn't mean that we need to treat this doctrine as no big deal though. As someone who holds the Reformed view, I am passionately

convinced that it best reflects all of the biblical data and I will not shy away from boldly proclaiming that conviction. At the same time though, I am not allowed to reject my brothers and sisters in Christ who do not hold to the Reformed view. For more information on what *Reformed* means, see my book *A Brief Look at the Denominations and Movements within Biblical Christianity Today* (pages 12-13). It can be found on my website.

And where the Bible does speak with absolute clarity, we must believe what it says. Anyone who denies these doctrines is in fact a heretic. An example of such a doctrine would be the fact that Jesus is God. Anyone who denies that doctrine cannot be considered our brother or sister in Christ. We can certainly still be friends with such a person, but we are not to accept him or her as our brother or sister. Another doctrine along these lines is the doctrine of inerrancy, and this is why that doctrine is so vitally important. So, you see there is no circular argumentation here. We start with the truth (that we receive from the Holy Spirit) that the Bible is the word of God at the very least in an overarching sense. If we go by its overall teachings, we are on the right track. And one of these teachings is that the original documents of the Bible were without error. That is how God chose to inspire His prophets and apostles. He did not allow them to err in their presentation of His word. He could have done so, but God chose not to bring forth His word in that manner. Further, we discover that this doctrine of inerrancy is one that we can be absolutely 100% positive about. Therefore, all true Christians must believe it in spite of the fact that we do not currently have any of the original documents.

You may want to ask, "Ok, but isn't all of God's word important. I don't understand why He would ever allow any of it to be corrupted by copyists and translators." All of God's word is of course immensely important. But that doesn't mean all of it is equally important. For example, when God records battles as part of the history of His word (and there is a lot of history in the Bible as stated above), He often gives numbers. These were of course very important to the original telling of the story. If God didn't give any numbers, the narratives wouldn't flow. But, we would never want to say that these numbers, even the perfect numbers given in the original documents, are as important as

the doctrine that Jesus rose from the grave. God allowing these numbers to become corrupted is not that big of a deal at all in the big scheme of things.

Now I am not saying that numbers are never important in the Bible. Again, if the Bible says that a certain number is correct multiple times, then we can be certain that it is the correct number. Hence, for example, when the Bible says on multiple occasions that Jesus rose on the first day of the week, we can know with certainty that He did in fact rise on the first day of the week. With that said, if a number is only recorded once in a current and solid translation of the Bible, like a number given in a battle for example, we cannot be absolutely certain that this number is correct. Now if we have no good reason to doubt this number from the manuscripts that we have or from extra-biblical history, then we should have a strong belief that this number is in all likelihood correct. We simply cannot be 100% certain is all.

You may say, "So, it sounds like inerrancy has no real practical value. As long as we believe that the Bible is reliable concerning its overarching teachings, we are good." That isn't the case though, because inerrancy is *itself* one of those overarching teachings! Therefore, if we are willing to throw it out, we will be willing to throw out other core teachings of the Bible, especially if we don't like them or we don't immediately see their practical value. And this is exactly what happened with Liberal Protestantism over the past 200 years. That religion has consistently denied inerrancy, and many, many of its followers also deny other core doctrines of the Christian faith (many of them deny almost all essential teachings of the Bible). Hence, inerrancy clearly has a massive amount of practical importance!

I do want to clear up one thing before moving forward. There are false teachers who say that the Bible is infallible only over theological matters. They say that when the Bible discusses matters of science and history, it is not infallible. If I'm not careful, you may come away with the conclusion that I basically believe the same thing only in regard to the manuscripts and translations. I want to be emphatically clear that this is not the case. If our good translations teach something of a historical or scientific nature, it is to

be believed. I am in no way saying that if the Bible teaches something repeatedly, but if it is of a historical and/or scientific nature, we can dismiss it. I am saying that if the Bible teaches *anything* repeatedly, we can know that this teaching is from God. But, if the Bible as we have it in our current good translations only mentions something once or twice, this may not be something that goes back to God. And this is true if this something is of a historical, scientific, or abstract theological nature. It applies across the board.

To be clear though, I am not saying that whatever was in the original at that point was in error. The doctrine of inerrancy absolutely forbids us from saying this. What we can say in those instances is usually one of two things. The first is that it is possible that a mistake crept into the manuscripts by a copyist. This doesn't always mean that the copyist was a bad person. Often copyists were doing their best, but they were not perfect and they did not have the gift of infallibility like the prophets and apostles as we have seen. With that said, there were bad copyists who sometimes interjected their own opinions. And sometimes this is even the case with the good copies. These are still good copies because overall they are very close to the original documents. We can know this through the internal testimony. You may ask, "Why would God use a bad person to make a good copy of His word?" God can use whoever He wants. The second thing we can say is that the translation might not be the best at this point. What we cannot as faithful Christians say is that the original was wrong at this point. Many false teachers have no problem saying that and they are rejecting the word of God when they do so.

Now you may be saying, "Ok, but in your 'basics' series, you often only give one or two verses for certain doctrines. If these doctrines are taught repeatedly, why didn't you provide more references?" My goal in the "basics" series was not to overwhelm new Christians or Christians like my son who struggle to understand theology. I often only give one or two references because those references are so abundantly clear. And I did make it clear to the reader in that series that the doctrine of the life and work of Jesus is primarily found in the Gospels. I also make it clear that the Gospels are the heart of the



Bible and cannot be read enough. This clearly should have implied to the reader that he or she should read the Gospels often. Further, in my essay on a proposed Bible reading plan (which can be found on my website), I also make it clear how often the Gospels should be read. And all of the doctrines where I did not provide a number of references are further supported by the Gospels or by verses I provide for other doctrines in the series.

With all of that very important information laid out, it is so important to understand that the vast majority of the really problematic passages in the Bible are saying things that are only mentioned once or twice in the Bible. In most cases, only once. Atheists love to harp on these verses. They will often make lists of them and post them on their websites or in their books. But they will refuse to explain to unsuspecting Christians all that I have made clear in this essay. What is also so important is that with many of these passages, theologians and apologists have proposed very plausible solutions without even appealing to the possibility of scribal error or bad translation. I will discuss these solutions soon. With that said, even if these proposed solutions are not correct, this fact in no way disproves the Bible based on all that we have gone over.

Now it is very true that this principle does not cover all biblical difficulties. There are some things like slavery, hell, the seeming sexism of the Old Testament, and others that are taught too frequently to dismiss. I cannot cover all of these in this essay, but I do want to be clear that very good explanations exist for all of these. They may not be explanations you like at first; I didn't like them when I was a new Christian either. But, if you really think them through, they actually do make a great deal of sense. If you do want to go deeper and search these things for yourself, I recommend my book *A False Kind of Christianity*. It can be found on my website. You do not need to read the entire book to reach the goal discussed here. If you just read the section "Answering Objections" in chapter 6, you will be on the right path. I also recommend in that section resources on the proposed solutions to the individual difficult passages discussed above.

I sincerely hope this essay has been helpful to you as you seek to better understand the wonder that is the word of God.