

A Gift From Heaven

Is the Bible Convincing?

God Saves from the Power of Sin Again

Pray: But to Whom?

6

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Is the Bible Convincing?

In 1525, William Tyndale translated the first complete New Testament into the English language. Aided by Johannes Gutenberg's invention of printing from metal movable type, an invention that had a tremendous impact on the mass distribution of books, a steady stream of Tyndale's New Testaments rolled off the presses.

Everyone His Own Bible

The numerous Bibles that have been printed ever since Tyndale have helped many men and women to become literate. Many have learned God's message from this book; many have been encouraged by it; many have come to an understanding of what God's plans for this world are; many have found happiness though embracing the Bible's teachings.

Nevertheless, the centuries following Tyndale's memorable publication have also seen much abuse of the Bible. There is probably not a single book in the world that has been tampered with as much as the Bible.

There is a Dutch proverb which says: "Every heretic has his own Bible." This means that, in spite of their different opinions, all sorts of people, with all sorts of ideas, appeal to the same Bible. Texts from one and the same Bible are used by Roman Catholics and Anglicans, pro-lifers and pro-choicers, conservatives and modernists to prove their point of view. The words of the Bible are used in many ways. One group reads a text and interprets it to mean something totally different from another group.

Sometimes, the explanation or meaning given to portions of Scripture is completely contradictory. For example, pacifists read the Bible and conclude that it teaches total disarmament, whereas others, on the basis of that same Bible, think that arms and armies are vital. Some will not take an oath because they say that the Bible condemns it, while their opponents find this practice permissible. To one group, the institution of the papacy is an obvious Biblical fact; to others, the Bible condemns this very institution.

What a muddle of contradictory and conflicting opinions! And the differences are so enormous. "Thou shalt not kill," it says in the Bible. This means to some that they should be anti-war but pro-abortion; others, however, take the same words to be pro-defence but anti-abortion.

The Bible Is a Unity

There must, of course, be a reason for these conflicts. In the first place, this is to be found in the manipulation of specific, incidental texts, which are detached from everything else in the Bible. One portion of Scripture is disconnected from the rest, isolated and put forward as evidence.

But the Bible is a unity. It is the harmonious, coherent Word of God. Nobody may appeal to only one portion of Scripture. Everything God reveals in the Bible forms a whole.

Still, the Bible itself shows us how Scripture passages can be manipulated. When the Lord Jesus is tempted in the desert by the devil, the latter uses a text from the Bible (*Matt. 4:1-10*). But Jesus refutes the devilish appeal to this text by showing that Satan had torn it out of its context. He shows how that particular text is to be read in the context of the whole Bible by putting other Scripture passages beside it. The devil fights with disjointed texts which suit his purposes.

Often an explanation of Scripture errs grossly because a certain text is lifted out of its context. It is common knowledge that you can not determine the meaning of a quote without reading its context. That goes for the Bible, too! You should never isolate one single sentence in the Bible from the story or argument in which it occurs. Nevertheless, this happens all too often. Again,

the Bible itself gives examples of this. Look at *Mark 16:16*. If this text is used as an isolated sentence, it seems to say that baptism can only take place after one has become a believer, with the result that only adults or those who are aware of the meaning of baptism can be baptized. Opponents of infant baptism appeal to this text from Mark.

But it is not correct. Just check the context of this quote from Mark. What is Mark writing about? The context shows that he is writing about the missionary work of the apostles. Their task is to preach the Gospel to adults, and when these adults have come to faith, to baptize them. If you look at the context the conclusion that infant baptism is rejected is certainly not justifiable. In addition, check what the Bible says in many places about the children of believers (*Gen. 17:7, Acts 2:39, 1 Cor. 7:14*). That's the way to read the Bible. To do justice to the text, you must read it as a coherent whole.

Slightly Twisted

It is a pity we tend to be careless in our dealings with the Bible. Reading things into the Bible shows, once again, that we are, by nature, rebels and enemies of God. As enemies of God, we contradict and twist His words. "For the mind that is set on the flesh (i.e. that is set on the thoughts and feelings of sinful man) is hostile to God." (*Rom. 8:7*) As sinners, we do not want to be convinced. We take offence at the Word of God, we try to remove the weight of God's words by twisting them and fitting them in into our own ideas and opinions. Not that we always do this on purpose. Twisting the Word of God may be caused by ignorance or mistakes, but the underlying cause is still the sinful nature of man, who wants to use the Bible for his own ends, and to prove his own opinions.

For example, the words spoken by Christ on the cross have often been twisted. Just before He died, Jesus called out, "Eloi, Eloi lama sabachthani?" (*Matt. 27:45-50*) That can be translated to read, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Of course, the people standing around the cross clearly heard what Jesus said. They

knew those words full well because they were came from the Old Testament (*Ps. 22*). Yet they twisted the words Jesus spoke. They said to each other, "let's see if Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, comes to save Him!" This is a horrible example of mocking and jeering with the written or spoken Word of God. Using slightly different renditions of a text is a favorite method of the devil. He already used it in Paradise, and he still likes to use it (*Gen. 3:1*). With his cunning method, the devil attempted to make Jesus disobedient, just as he tried to do that with the congregation at Corinth (*Matt. 4; 2 Cor. 11:3,4*). You can read up on it yourself. Some false apostles were preaching a slightly different gospel from the one Paul preached. Satan was trying to deceive the Corinthian congregation.

Paul puts it this way: "...Satan disguises himself as an angel of light." (*2 Cor. 11:14*). Satan passes himself off as a messenger of God. That is the ever-present danger you must be aware of and resist. If you do not the devil will quickly lure you into sin.

Let the Word Speak for Itself

If falsehood is that close to truth, it is so much more difficult to distinguish between the two. That is why it is very important to study the Bible carefully and to read it thoroughly. The Bible must be read as a coherent unit. Reading the Bible requires a humble and obedient attitude on the part of the reader. That is hard! Putting aside our own personal views often runs counter to our nature, and we all tend to think that we know it better. We think we can solve our problems in our own way.

However, the Bible is not a novel and cannot be read as such. It speaks about difficult things, and, as a result, it is sometimes hard to understand (*2 Pet. 3:16*). The contents and meaning of the Bible are majestic and profound: all of life is influenced by it. It deals with great and important matters. Therefore, you have to do your utmost to learn to understand and absorb the Bible. You have to accept the contents without trying to explain them in your own way because the Bible contains such an important message. Let the Word speak for itself.

God Saves from the Power of Sin Again

Genesis 11-14

After the disruption of the tower of Babel and the confusion of tongues, many nations arose with their own language and culture. Slowly, God was forgotten more and more, and the memories of His gracious intervention at Babel faded. But God did not forget His people. He maintained control over history. The way He took charge in the lives of a certain small group of people proves that He keeps His promise of salvation for apostate man.

A Risky Undertaking

In *Genesis 11:10-32* there is a genealogy of the descendants of Shem, the son of Noah. At the end of the list we meet Abram, along with his father Terah. They both lived in Ur, the land of the Chaldeans.

Ur was located in Mesopotamia, present day Iraq. More specifically, Ur was situated on the Euphrates river just before it empties into the Persian Gulf. Excavations have shown that it was not just a primitive village but a city with a highly developed culture for those days. For example, there were already two-story homes, and people used silver and golden utensils. It must have been an affluent, but also a very religious, society. There was a massive temple tower, properly called a ziggurat, comparable to the one the people of Babel wanted to build. On top of this structure stood an image of the deity worshipped in Ur. Just as in Babel so in Ur, man was at the centre. The people of Ur were only interested in prosperity, and they needed their gods for that. The only reason they sacrificed to their god was to obtain and retain prosperity.

One day God told Terah and Abram to leave the corrupt city of Ur. At first they stayed in Haran, some 900 kilometers upstream from Ur, and lived there for some time. But after Terah's death God once again talked to Abram and told him to continue his journey (*Gen. 12:1-3*). This time he had to leave his father's house behind as well. He had to go to an unknown country that God would point out to him.

Abram headed in the direction of the land of Canaan. Certainly for those days, such a journey was a risky undertaking. Abram left his familiar surroundings, his safety and his security behind, and traveled to foreign countries where he would be without legal protection. He became stateless. The tribes and nations he encountered would probably have considered him an intruder.

Outlawed but Full of Confidence

Abram knew what he was up against, but he remained obedient to God's command. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran" (*Gen. 12:4*). "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go" (*Heb. 11:8*).

By faith, in spite of all the gloomy prospects, Abram went. He trusted in the God who had called him. And God taught Abram to trust in Him. "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you..." (*Gen. 12:2,3*). Relying on this rich promise, Abram and his family started the long trek.

His departure was a major turning point in history. Up to *Genesis 11:26*, the history of mankind is described. Now, God made a new beginning with one man and one family. God selected one race, and one people to deal with. Abram became the patriarch, or leader, of this chosen nation. And it is out of this nation, that the Redeemer, Jesus Christ, will be born.

With an Eye to the Future

God, of course, had a reason for the command He gave to Terah and Abram. The danger of Terah and his family falling totally prey to idolatry in Ur was just too great. Without noticing it, they would have been taken in, and God would have been shoved in the background more and more until He was completely rejected. Away from their country and family, however, a conscious choice would be possible. Besides there would not be any acquaintances or relatives trying to influence them.

Centuries later, one of Israel's leaders, Joshua, reviews this history. Among other things he says, "Your fathers lived of old beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (*Jos. 24:2*). That is why Abram had to leave Ur. God always keeps a small group of people that continues to know Him. He makes sure that His words are not forgotten. A remnant will always know about the coming of the Redeemer and will always look forward to it.

Why did God limit Himself to just Abram and his family, though? Why are other races left to their fate? God lets them go their own way, so they may do whatever they want (*Deut. 9:4-6; Ps. 147:19,20*). But was Abram better than the others? Why did God choose Abram? We simply do not know why. Abram was not better than other people, yet God wanted to use him to execute His plan. God, in His infinite wisdom, picked Abram, and later the people of Israel, to continue to know Him until Jesus' appearance in the flesh. Still, while we do not know God's reason for choosing Abram in particular we do know something about God's purpose. Abram and his descendants were set apart from other nations, so that later all nations would be blessed. That is why He says to Abram, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (*Gen. 12:3*). That blessing comes in the birth of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of both Jews and Gentiles.

Safe in a Foreign Land

Childless, but accompanied by their nephew Lot, the rich shepherd Abram and his wife Sarai leave Haran at God's command. Eventually, they came to Canaan. There again, God speaks to Abram and promises to give this land to Abram's descendants (*Gen. 12:7*).

Now you would expect Abram to be very prosperous. Had he not been obedient, and had God not promised to bless him? Yes, he had been obedient, but that does not translate into instant prosperity. He will have to learn to trust in God's promises and to believe in those promises even though he does not see any results.

The land God has promised to Abram is stricken by a famine, and Abram is forced to travel on to Egypt. Apparently, there was no famine there (*Gen. 12:10-20*). Fearing that the Egyptians would kill him for his wife he calls her his sister. It was only a "white lie" because she was his half sister (*Gen. 20:12*), but Abram's intent was still wrong. This episode illustrates that God did not choose Abram because he was better than other people. In fact, Abram himself proves that he is no better than anyone else because he also distrusts God. Over against Abram's doubts we see God's loyalty. Abram leaves Egypt richer than he came, and God sees to it that he returns to the promised land of Canaan.

Will all of it finally be Abram's? Even that does not seem to be the case. When Abram and Lot's servants quarrel over grazing land for their sheep Abram allows Lot to decide where he would like to go. Lot chooses what seems to be the best part: the Jordan valley with the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, while Abram gets the rest of Canaan (*Gen. 13*).

However, God wants it that way. Abram has to part from the rest of his family as well. Now he is really alone. But then we see how God makes His words come true. After some time Lot moves into the wicked city of Sodom. This city soon fell under the attack of some neighbouring kings and Sodom lost the battle. Lot was taken as one of the captives. When Abram heard what had happened he took the soldiers that he had and went after the powerful kings. God was with him and Abram and his miniature army defeated the kings and set the captives, including Lot, free (*Gen. 14*).

Following that, Abram is strengthened in an extraordinary way. There is another king in Canaan, namely Melchizedek, king of Salem (later known as Jerusalem), who still served the true God. Melchizedek comes out to meet and bless Abram. God has given Abram his first victory in Canaan. He has shown him that he is safe, even in a foreign country, if he trusts in God alone. God led Abram safely to his new country. He protected him. Indeed He protects all who are His. Believers can rely on God. He never forgets His own or His promises to them.

Pray: But to Whom?

To whom should you pray? The answer to this question is obvious for some people. They would say, "To God, of course." Others, however, may not find the answer so self-evident. They may ask, "Who is God? I can not see Him, so how am I going to pray to Him?"

Believing without Seeing

The book of Exodus tells us how the Israelites left Egypt, made a long journey through the desert, and finally arrived at Mount Sinai (*Ex. 19*). It was there that God spoke to the Israelites (*Ex. 20*). The mountain was wrapped in smoke and fire to such an extent that the Israelites became scared and did not want to go near it (*Ex. 20:18*). They witnessed God's enormous majesty. His presence could clearly be felt. Yet when Moses stayed away for a long time, the people became uncertain (*Ex. 32:1*). In spite of that palpable presence of God, the Israelites did not trust Him. So Aaron made a golden calf, similar to the ones they had seen in Egypt. The Israelites immediately accepted it as their god. They thought they had to see God to really be able to trust in Him.

But that is not the way God wants to be served. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks to the people just before his death (*Deut. 4:9-20*). He reminds them of that moment when they were at the foot of Mount Sinai. The people did not see any figure or visible image there; they only heard a voice. Moses warns the people not to visualize God through the image of some creature. Moses tells them to be on their guard against that, and to remember that they had heard not seen God. That is how God makes Himself known to people: only through His words and not in any other way.

Who is God? The Bible says, "The King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has ever seen or can see." (*1 Tim. 6:15,16*) Even Moses, of whom the Bible says that God spoke to him face to face, "as a man speaks to his friend," was not allowed to see Him (*Ex. 33:11,18-23; 34:5-9*).

God wants us to trust His Word. In the New Testament, Jesus says to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." (*John. 20:29*)

First Listen, Then Pray

Believing means accepting or trusting in what has been said. That is why if you really want to pray, you should first listen to what God is telling you. Your prayer to Him should build on what you have heard. Praying in fact becomes answering.

If you believe what is written in the Bible, namely, that God wants to be your Father and that you are His child, then you can prayerfully answer with, "Our Father who art in heaven." When God tells you in this Word that He wants to provide you with everything you need for your daily life, you may prayerfully answer with, "Give us today our daily bread." (*Matt. 6:25-34*) When God says that He will forgive all your debts for Christ's sake, you may pray, "Forgive us our debts and we have forgiven those who have trespassed against us." (*Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:77*) God also tells you who He is, what He does, and what He promises. The best way to respond to all this wonderful information is with prayer.

Knowing Him through His Word

We know God because He has revealed Himself to us. God has introduced Himself to us in His Word, the Bible. We know from the Old Testament that there have been people whom God has spoken to directly. Since they did not have the Old Testament this was the way God revealed Himself to them. For example, God spoke directly with Abraham (*Gen. 12:3; 15:1,2,7*). Even though God is the Almighty, He revealed Himself to sinful Abraham in a covenant. God also spoke to Isaac, Abraham's son, and his son Jacob. Later, God also spoke to Moses and told him how He wants to be addressed (*Gen. 17:11; 26:24; 28:13*). God's name is Yahweh, which is rendered as LORD in our translation. Yahweh means, "I am who I am!", or in other words, "I will always be the same, unchanging and loyal." God reveals who He is progressively. In Exodus, for example, He says that He is gracious and forgiving,

but that He will by no means clear the guilty (*Ex. 34:6,7*). His revelation becomes clearer when He uses the *prophets (Is. 45:20-25)*. God is the eternal Creator. Besides Him there is no God. When He sent His only Son into this world, God saw to it that we knew Him even better. "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made Him known." (*John 1: 18; Heb. 1: 1*)

We only know God because He has spoken about Himself in the Bible, through people like the prophets and apostles.

Images and Ideas

Man has always tried to gain more control over his existence and future. Invariably, man has attempted to win the favour of the powers he felt he was depending on, so as to influence his wellbeing and future. He would make himself an image of these powers - his gods because then they would no longer seem to be that far away and awesome. Man wants certainty; he wants to be able to command the future. That certainty had to come through the consultation of all sorts of fortune-tellers or even the dead.

The people of Israel, too, committed idolatry. Time and again you read in Bible how the prophets warned against it (*Is. 40:12-31; 46:5-7; 1 Kings 18:20-40*). When the Israelites consulted the dead and fortune-telling spirits, the prophets warned against that because God had expressly forbidden it (*Is. 8:19; Deut. 18:9-14*). God wants us to trust, serve, and pray to Him only. Apart from Him, there is no God (*Is. 45:20-25*).

Nowadays, in the twentieth century, the danger of worshipping idols doesn't seem to loom large. We feel far above the primitive idolaters whom we read about in the history books or the Bible. And yet, even today, in spite of our great knowledge, our future and well-being are still uncertain, and many search for knowledge about the future through horoscopes and consulting with the dead. Sometimes modern man also resorts to the mystic eastern religions.

Western man no longer makes wooden, stone, or copper images of his god, but that does not mean that he is not practising idolatry. Whoever thinks he can know God without His Word forms his own idea or image of God, and in doing so commits idolatry. Even if he thinks he is serving the Lord God, he is, in fact, serving a god other than the One who has made Himself known in the Bible.

The following examples illustrate how easily these images arise. One good example is the notion that God is love. The Bible does say that God is love, but whoever takes that to mean that all people will be saved has formed his own image of God (*1 John 4:16*). The Bible does not speak of such a God. God is loving but also a strict and just God who will also punish if it is necessary.

Another example is the notion that God does not concern Himself with this world. Many people think that suffering does not affect Him, and that He does not care about anything that happens to them. God tells us something different in His Word. He takes care of us. He has even counted the hairs of our heads (*Matt. 10:28-31*).

In Jesus' Name

God is near when we pray. He is not a sublime, high, and far away God that we cannot pray to directly. The intervention of saints or other human beings is unnecessary.

There is only one Mediator: the man Jesus, who is at the same time the Son of God (*1 Tim. 2:5,6*). God only hears our prayers because Jesus gave up His life for sinful people (*Heb. 7:25*).

If you believe that, you can turn to God, regardless of your motive, in all freedom. Therefore, you have to pray in Jesus' name, as numerous Scripture passages clearly indicate (*Heb. 10:19-23; John 14:6; 5:20-23; 16:23,24; Matt. 11:21; 1:27-30*). Jesus Christ is Saviour. He is the only Mediator between God and man. Whoever prays in Jesus' name will always be heard.

Questions 6

Is the Bible Convincing?

1. *In Matt. 4:5,6* Satan tempts Jesus using a Bible text (*Ps. 91:11,12*). Why was this use of the text wrong? (Pay attention to Jesus' reply and the context of the verses 11 and 12.)
2. Twisting the Word of God is a serious matter. What does Paul say about it in *Gal. 1:6-9* ?
3. If you do not want to listen to the Word of God, you may eventually become deaf to it. Read *Acts 28:24-29*. Summarize what is said there (see also *Is. 6:9-10* and *Matt. 13:14-16*).

God Saves from the Power of Sin Again

1. Why did Abram have to leave his homeland and family? Why did he obey?
2. Was Israel chosen because it was "better" than other nations? What does it say in *Deut. 9:4-8*? (see also *Acts 7:51-53*).
3. Did Lot really choose the best part of the land (*Gen. 13:13*)? Give reasons.

Pray: But to Whom?

1. What do we learn about God from creation (*Rom. 1:20* and *Ps. 19:1-7*) and what do we learn about Him only from Scripture?
2. Could you mention a number of things modern man puts his trust in which are actually idols? (*Luke 16:10-14*)
3. What is your opinion of the notion that all religions are equal and that it does not really matter how one serves God as long as one loves Him?