

# A Gift From Heaven

*The Bible Itself Is Worth the Trouble*

*The Graves Will Be Opened*

*Christ Will Return*

## Lesson 24

REFORMED  
EVANGELISM  
TASKFORCE

# The Bible Is Worth the Trouble

By now you have begun to understand the Bible to some degree. You have hopefully become interested in the Word of God. And yet, at a certain moment you might become disappointed in this book, maybe this has even happened already. There is no denying that its contents are difficult to grasp, and it's not always easy to figure out how to apply the Bible's teaching to your life. Nevertheless, whoever takes the trouble to study the passages that are hard to understand and whoever takes the trouble to conquer the disappointment, will find out that in the long run that the Bible is a book that is more than worth the trouble.

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## To Become Like a Child

Especially older people who are introduced to the Bible for the first time may experience that let down feeling. It is only natural that a person who has grown up with the Bible will experience less difficulty understanding the Bible than a person who sees it for the first time. You might be consoled by the fact that even ministers and scholars have difficulty understanding certain passages in the Bible.

Children, on the one hand, hold their breath as they listen to the narrative Jesus' birth. They do not have the slightest trouble in following and believing the story. Adults, on the other hand, immediately have questions and doubts, and as a result experience difficulty understanding it. What are angels? What do they look like? How can they talk to people? How many were there? And above all: what is the answer to the mystery of the virgin birth of Jesus? There are no clear cut answers to all these complicated questions. They surpass the reach of our minds. Our scope of comprehension is too small. There is no one, no matter how clever, no matter how much he may be at home in the Bible, no matter how prepared he is to accept what God says, who will ever be able to understand these mysteries.

There is one solution though. Jesus tells us that we have to become like little children (*Matt. 18:1-4*). With a childlike faith we have to accept the things we cannot understand. Everything has happened in the way God has told us in His Word, and no matter how much we would like to, we can not unravel all the mysteries (*Mark 10:15*). We have to accept it in a childlike manner on the basis of God's authority. That isn't that difficult, is it? We accept all kinds of things on the authority of people, even though we do not understand it. We even accept things from a machine like the computer. Shouldn't God's Word be more trustworthy?

## Dangerous Misunderstanding

Besides those passages that surpass our understanding, the Bible also contains parts that are difficult to interpret because of their difficult style of writing. For instance, the prophesies of Ezekiel, the letter of Paul to the Romans or the letter to the Hebrews are not parts of the Bible that you would read for relaxation. In one of his letters Peter writes about the difficult passages that occur in the epistles of Paul. "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their destruction, as they do the other scriptures." (*2 Pet. 3:15,16*)

Peter makes it clear that there are dangers involved in using "difficult portions" of the Bible as one sees fit. There will always be people who knowingly and deliberately abuse the Bible. Unfortunately, they confuse others or, even worse, try to win others over for their own personal ideas.

If somebody claims that Jesus did not die for our sins, every Christian would disagree with him. It is stated in the Gospels in plain language. However, if somebody, referring to letters of Paul, claims that a man may do whatever he sees fit, it becomes much more difficult to refute that statement (*Gal. 3:13, 5:1*). Did Christ then not redeem us from the curse of the law? Since He did, we do not have to conform to the law anymore, do we? Doesn't Paul himself say that for a Christian everything is lawful (*1 Cor. 6:12*)? Under the influence of such "twisted" thoughts the congregation in Corinth was even able to gloss over fornication.

It is easy to twist what is written in the Bible to give it a different meaning. Nobody will deny that this makes the Bible a difficult book, but we should distinguish between levels of difficulty.

God has had people write down in the Bible how He saved us through His son Jesus from the power of sin and death. Yet exactly how this redemption came about or how it functions, exceeds our understanding. We, as people, cannot possibly form an adequate idea of God's work of salvation.

While it is impossible for us to completely comprehend redemption, we will still have to know about it. Whatever we are allowed to know about it is revealed in the Bible. The Bible contains exactly enough information for salvation - no more, no less. That is why He gave us His Word in the first place.

The wisdom and love of God which He shows us in His plan of redemption is incomprehensible. We simply cannot understand it completely, but guided by the Holy Spirit, the authors of the Bible have worded it in such a way that everybody can understand it sufficiently. The unsearchable thoughts of God had to be rendered in the Bible in human language, and miraculously God enabled the authors of His Word to do so. They had to use images to approximate the "incomprehensible" truth, just like God also uses symbols like the tabernacle, temple, and offerings to make clear who He is and how He saves the world.

Paul tried especially hard to write in such a way that his readers could understand the rich thoughts of God. At the same time, however, his letters reveal that he realizes the inadequacy of his words. He has to write of a mystery when he says about Jesus. "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: 'He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.'" (*1 Tim. 3:16*). When Paul writes about the wisdom of God he calls it a "hidden wisdom" or mystery. Nobody has known that wisdom. "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love Him." (*1 Cor. 2:9*) God gave His people Israel salvation, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" (*Rom. 11:33-36*)

Whoever wants to grasp what God thinks and does, will find that the Bible is a difficult book.

## **A Guide To Show You the Way**

Fortunately, we do not have to depend on human insight to be able to understand the Bible. God gave the Holy Spirit as a helper. That Spirit who works faith in the hearts of all believers is also the guide for whoever reads the Bible. The Spirit sees to it that the Word of God is understood by all reverent and obedient readers. The Holy Spirit also brings the readers of the Bible together. They seek contact and unity with others who know the same joy. These happy people find each other in the church, that is the church where the Bible is explained and is accepted as the completely trustworthy Word of God. The Word of God is proclaimed and interpreted in sermons every Sunday again strengthening faith in the process. In this manner the knowledge of the Bible grows.

The church is also the place where God calls on His human servants to explain His Word. Jesus gave the "office bearers" in the church this task. One of the first office bearers in the first centuries church was Philip. He was one of the first seven deacons (*Acts 8:26-40*). By God's grace he is allowed to explain the Old Testament to a eunuch from Ethiopia, who actually was familiar with the Old Testament, but did not understand it at first. Through Philip's explanation this man comes to faith and is baptized (*Acts 8:31*).

"But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?" (*Rom. 10:14,15*) It is interesting how Paul connects the hearing and preaching of the Word of God and the process of coming to faith. The Church sends the Gospel into the world. The glad tidings invite you. Come! Respond to that call and come and join the Church!

## **Conquer the Difficulties**

Of course it is always necessary to study the Bible yourself, but you must put your own conclusion to the test by checking what others, who also have accepted the Bible as the unabridged Word of God, say about it. For centuries people have studied the Bible. A treasure of knowledge and experience has been built up in the church of Jesus Christ. For instance you can find a summary of this knowledge in one of the confessions of the church (cf. Belgic Confession). Use this treasure to help you in your personal study of the Bible. You should also take an easy portion, like one of the first three gospels, especially the gospel of Mark, or the Acts of the Apostles, or perhaps one of the Old Testament historical books. After that you can gradually study the more difficult parts of the Bible like one of the letters of Paul, or the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah. Eventually it will become evident that the difficulties in reading the Bible slowly disappear. The parts that have already been studied will make other passages more accessible and understandable. After taking all this into consideration you cannot help but come to the conclusion that the Bible is certainly worth the trouble.

# The Graves Will Be Opened

## Article 11,12

The Bible recognizes two kinds of death and two kinds of life. Commonly, death means to have died. The Bible also uses death to mean "cut off from God" (*Col. 2:13*). Living means breathing, and being in motion, but it can also mean being with God. When God says to Adam, "for in the day that you eat of it you shall die", He says that Adam is no longer allowed to live under the protection of God, and that God is no longer willing to live with him (*Gen. 2:17*). "And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (*John 17:3*).

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## More Than a Living Body

A man is more than a living body. Life, in the common sense of the word, ceases when a person dies and his spirit returns to God. Just read that moving description of the degeneration of the human body in *Ecclesiastes 12*. "The spirit of man returns to God" (*Ecc. 12:7*). Jesus also referred to that when He died on the cross. He said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit" (*Luke 23:46*). And Stephen cried, as he was dying "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (*Acts 7:59*).

When the Bible uses the word "spirit" (with a small "s") it is referring to what we call the "soul". That last word has several meanings in the Word of God. Sometimes it simply indicates physical life. In addition, it is also used to distinguish a man as a person or living being rather than an inanimate object. The Bible also uses the word soul to define what constitutes a man apart from his body. "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (*Matt. 10:28*). Every person consists of both a soul and a body. We cannot imagine how one can exist without the other, but the Bible makes it abundantly clear that the soul lives on after death.

## Life After Death

There is life after death. When some Jews had a discussion with Jesus about the possibility of the resurrection from the dead, Jesus reminded them of what God had said long ago to Moses: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (*Ex. 3:6*). Jesus explained to them that "He is not God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto Him" (*Luke 20:38*). They are alive even if their bodies are decomposed. They are alive in heaven with God and with Christ.

When the apostle Paul was in danger of losing his life, he wrote that life meant he would be able to work fruitfully in the service of Jesus. He was readily prepared and eager to do so, but he also longed to be with Jesus in heaven. That was far better than life. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (*Phil. 1:21-23*). Paul knew that dying would not mean total death. After his physical death, he would immediately be with his Lord.

Jesus Himself had said so when He was hanging on the cross. There were two criminals hanging next to Him on the cross. One of the two gave evidence of his faith in Jesus while he was bleeding to death on the cross beside him. He asked Jesus to remember him when He entered His kingdom (*Luke 23: 42,43*). He received an answer that reached beyond death. "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (*Luke 23:43*). He would be dead, but at the same time he would be living with Christ.

If you believe in Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, then you will continue to live when you die. This life with God will never be taken away again, not even temporarily (*Ps. 36:9; 73:23-26*). That life is forever, for all eternity. In this way the words of Jesus, which were quoted in the beginning of this lesson, become much clearer. "He who believes in me, though he die (in the regular sense of the word), yet he shall live (live with God), and whoever lives (in the regular sense of the word) and believes in me shall never die (lose his life with God)" (*John 11:25,26*).

## **The Resurrection Is for Everybody**

All the dead shall be raised up on the day of Christ's return to earth: believers, as well as, unbelievers. It does not matter how they died, or what happened to their bodies, all bodies will be raised. "And the sea gave up the dead in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done" (*Rev. 20:13*). But those who have not believed in Jesus Christ will be raised only to be condemned to eternal death. The unbelievers will be separated from God forever (*Rev. 21:8*).

Human language cannot adequately express how terrible the condemnation of God is. Neither can our language express the glory of eternal life. It is no wonder then, that the Bible always speaks of them in metaphors (*Matt. 22:1-14*). In a different context Paul said "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (*1 Cor. 2:9*).

We cannot imagine how terrible God's condemnation is. To live with God as His children is unimaginably glorious. Eternal life is living forever in the proximity of God the Father. The separation between heaven and earth shall be terminated. The believers shall be with Him forever (*1 Thess. 4:17*).

"And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away'" (*Rev. 21:3-5*).

Then death shall be conquered (*1 Cor. 15:54-57*). Thanks be to God! He has given us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. "...Blessed are they that have not seen and yet believe" (*John 20:29*). The return of Jesus to the world will be a pleasant surprise for whoever believes in Him. There will be a joyous future, a future to which you may look forward with longing, for it is real life.

# Christ Will Return

## *Matthew 24,25*

God created the world and man good. One man, Adam, corrupted himself and his world by his own sins. Fortunately, however, it will not remain that way. Sin will be totally conquered and the devil will lose. In the Bible, God tells us how He delivers His people from sin. God promised a Saviour who has already come to the world. Jesus, the Son of God, became man and erased the debt of man by His own suffering and death. Though He has gone to heaven again, He has not left us alone. He has sent His Spirit over the entire earth to guide those people who believe in Jesus. Those who believe, invite other people to believe. In that way Jesus calls all who believe in Him together, and He builds His church. The church is Christ's bride, waiting for the Bridegroom to return. The waiting is not in vain, for even though it may take a long time, Christ will come back.

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## **Christ Will Come Back**

Shortly before His death, during His last supper with His disciples, Jesus spoke to them about His return to earth. "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (*John 14:2,3*).

His disciples watched Him go to heaven with their own eyes. They stared at Him until a cloud hid Him from their sight. Before they could even feel lonely two angels appeared with a very comforting message. "This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (*Acts 1:11*).

"In the same way" means that just as He, as a real human being, visibly left the earth for heaven, so He will return as a real human being. Then everyone will be able to see Him, both the living and the dead. "Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him" (*Rev. 1:7*). That is the future of this world. That will be the grand finale to God's history of salvation.

There are many people who cannot, or will not, believe in that grand finale, in such a spectacular ending to the world. Yes, they look forward to happiness and peace on earth, and to a world that will be better than the one we are living in now, but that world will have to come about by the efforts of man himself. They believe that only man can bring about a better world like that. Many people long for such an ideal world, where there is happiness and joy for everyone, but the answer to the question how man will build such a world is, as history teaches, not that simple.

On the opposite end of the scale, there are also innumerable people who have a very pessimistic view of the world's future. Man is busy destroying his own world, and wasting the natural resources. Cruelty, crime, and the ever present threat of a nuclear war are enough reasons for them to abandon hope for a better world.

Admittedly, people have their own ideas of what the future has in store, but only the Bible gives a definite answer. The Bible says this world is headed for destruction, but at the same time it is headed for salvation. It may seem contradictory, but a more detailed look at Christ's return will show it isn't.

## At His Coming

What will our world be like when Jesus returns? You can read about that in the Bible. People will be busy with their work. Just like in the time of Noah, when the flood came, people in love will be marrying, and weddings will be celebrated with parties. Life will be following its natural course (*Matt. 24:36-42*).

Before Christ returns there will also be people who will claim to be the returning "Christ" 'whom everyone has been waiting for so long. They will only be "false prophets", in spite of the fact that they are able to perform great miracles (*Matt. 24:24-27*). Many astounded people will follow them and believe in them. Quite a number of such "Christs" and "prophets" have been around already (*Rev. 13:11-18*).

The Bible also says that there will be an anti-Christ. He will oppose everything that is related to Christ and will claim divine honour, trying to prove with miracles that he is "god" (*2 Thess. 2:1-4*). The Bible does not say whether the anti-Christ is one person or more, but the Bible teaches clearly that the hate directed toward God will come to a climax while he is on earth. Then Christ shall return. For the anti-Christ, this return will come completely unexpected. Jesus, who was sentenced before the world judge, Pontius Pilate, and before the spiritual judges of the Jewish Sanhedrin, will then appear as the Judge Himself. He will be the Judge who shall pass sentence on both the living and the dead (*2 Tim. 4:1; 1 Pet. 4:5; Jude 14,15*).

Everyone will have to appear before that Judge, both rich and poor, leaders and followers, believers and unbelievers, men and women, children and aged (*Matt. 25:31,32*). The summons will come by an archangel and the dead will rise at the "trumpet of God" (*1 Thess. 4:16, John 5:28-29*). Then every man will be judged by Jesus according to what he has done in this life, good or bad (*2 Cor. 5:10, Rev. 20:12*). The Bible says that we will even have to give account for all the idle words which we have spoken (*Matt. 12:36*).

We will have to account for what we have done with our time, of where we have found our recreation, of all our words and deeds, even of things we thought nobody knew anything about. Can anyone be pardoned when the Judge, from whom nothing is hidden, passes His judgment? (*Heb. 4:13*)

Yes, there are people who will be pardoned. All those who have believed that the Judge Jesus is also their Saviour. All who have believed in the forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus Christ. "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of god, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus..." (*Rom. 3:23,24*).

For all those who believe that, the sentence of the Judge will be an acquittal. The believer does not receive this acquittal because he has been such a good person, or such a good believer, so humane and full of goodwill. He receives acquittal only because Jesus has paid his debt (*Acts 10:43*). Whoever does not believe will be condemned. There is only pardon by virtue of what Christ has done.

That is what all believers trust in. That is the content of their faith, a faith that is revealed in the many good deeds they do out of thankfulness for their salvation.

Together with all people who have ever lived we will stand before Him on the day of His return. Then, as a shepherd He will separate the sheep from the goats. It will be a very strict process of segregation, without any intermediate group. In *Matt. 25:31-46* Jesus gives a very graphic description of that day. The unbelievers will be condemned. They will stand before the Judge, completely responsible for their deeds and will be judged according to all they have thought and done. For that reason there will be gradual differences in the severity of sentences that are meted out. Those who have heard the gospel but still have refused to repent will receive the heaviest punishment (*Matt. 11:20-24*).

## Terror or Joy

When Jesus returns, all those who did not accept Him as the Saviour will be terrified, but there will be great joy for all those who expected His coming in faith (*Luke 23:30; Rev. 6:15-17*). There is no reason to be afraid if you know that Jesus, the Saviour, is the Judge.

Christ will openly recognize them, or "confess them before the Father" (*Matt. 10:32; Rev. 3:5*). He will tell His Father that they belong to Him, and that He paid for their sins. As a result they will be acquitted. On the other hand, it is written, "but whoever denies me before me, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven" (*Matt. 10:33*).

Jesus will have nothing to do with people who are ashamed of Him, with people who do not want to know Him. He will not defend those people before God.

There are many people who think that such a picture of the last day of this world is nonsense. Also in Peter's days there were such mockers. Scornfully they asked "Where is the promise of His coming?" In other words, when are those promises of Jesus' return actually going to be fulfilled? Until today nothing has changed. Peter explained to them that God's timekeeping is different from ours. One day is as a thousand years with Him and a thousand years as one day. God is not postponing the fulfillment of His promise, but He is longsuffering and patient (*2 Pet. 3:3-9*). Before Christ returns, the Gospel, the glad tidings must be known by all the nations of the world. Only then will Christ return, suddenly, unexpectedly, as a thief in the night (*1 Thess. 5:1,2; 2 Pet. 3:10*).

## The Graves Will Be Opened

"You are dust and to dust you shall return" (*Gen. 3:19*). These words in which God announces the punishment for Adam's sins, are well known to everyone. From the moment that God pronounced these words, sin has reigned like a king in the world (*Rom. 5:21*).

Death is not a pleasant thought. The body is buried or cremated and it decomposes into dust. What is left is the same lifeless material into which God blew His breath of life (*Gen. 2:7*). Nothing is left anymore but memories. And so the popular motto is, "Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die" (*1 Cor. 15:32*). Take life as it comes. For with dying everything is over, finished. Or could there perhaps still be a surprise?

## Life and Death

Who does not dread dying? Even the Bible calls death an enemy (*1 Cor. 15:26*). Death destroys life. Death is terrible, no matter how many flowers are placed on the casket or the grave. To write so bluntly about death is not appreciated by many people. Most people do not want to talk about death. They prefer to ignore it. But you cannot avoid death. Is there anything that interferes more drastically with your life? The body stops functioning, the human voice is silenced, even the voice of those who used it to praise God. Death even silences praise to God (*Psa. 6:5; 115:17,18*).

If death is really the end, then Christians are really to be "pitied". During their life they passed up many things that might have cheered up their life somewhat. The Bible is also very blunt about this issue. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied" (*1 Cor. 15:19*). But death is not always really death, neither is living always really living. In the Bible the words "dead" and "death" do not always mean the same. The Bible says that a man can be dead, and still live, and that he can be alive and still dead. That is not a play on words. It is reality.

I (Jesus) am the resurrection, and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (*John 11:25*). For believers, therefore, death is not the end but it is a beginning. It is the beginning of perfect communion with God.

Though there are people who try to figure out when that day will come, it is futile and foolish to do so. Even the Son does not know when that day will be, neither does He know the exact moment of His return (*Matt. 24:36*).

On that day, which could very well be tomorrow, "...the heavens will be kindled and dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire!" (*2 Pet. 3:12*) In that way the earth will be purified from all sin. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. All injustice and all sin will be completely banished. Yes, and there is more. Believers will live in perfect harmony with the ordinances and the law of God. The church of Jesus Christ longs for that day. The believers in that church pray that their Saviour will come soon (*Rev. 22:17*). The bride, the church, calls her Bridegroom, Christ, "Come Lord Jesus, come with

haste!" "For he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth" (*Ps. 96:13*).

# Questions 24

## The Bible Is Worth the Trouble

1. How would you summarize the message of the Bible?
2. Can you name a number of texts (besides those listed) in which the essence of the Bible is summarized? (*John 1:1-14; 3:12-18; Is. 53; Luke 24:25-49; Heb. 1-2:18*)
3. The Bible explains itself. Which parts of the Old Testament are interpreted by Peter in his speech on the day of Pentecost? (*Acts 2*)

## The Graves Will Be Opened

1. In *Luke 16:19-31* you can read the parable of the "rich man and poor Lazarus". What does this parable tell you concerning believers and unbelievers immediately following death?
2. Eternal life with God is compared with living in the city of the "new Jerusalem" in *Rev. 21 and 22*. What are the features of this city?
3. In *Rev. 22* eternal life is described as living in the new paradise. What are the differences and similarities between this and the paradise in Genesis? (*Rev. 22:1-5; Gen. 2:8-25*)

## Christ Will Return

1. In *Matthew 25:1-13* you can read the story of the wise and foolish maidens. This parable of Jesus deals with His return. Who are meant by the wise and the foolish maidens?
2. What does the Bible say about the time when Jesus shall return to the earth? (*Matt. 25:13; 24:36; Mark 13:32-37; Luke 12:35-40; 1 Thess. 5:1,2; 2 Pet. 3:10*)
3. What did some believers in the church of Thessalonica think about the return of Jesus, and what did they do as a result? What is Paul's reaction to this? (*2 Thess. 2:1-3; 3:10-12; Matt. 24:45-51; 25:14-30*)