
THE CHRISTIAN PROSPECT

VOL. 1, NO. IV – NOVEMBER 7, 2021

A Word to Our Readers

I would like to apologize for the delay in this month's issue of the Prospect. My wife and I returned from a three-week evangelistic trip outside the country late on the evening of October 30. I intended to write my contributions during the trip, but it seems that I overestimated my abilities. This issue is a month late, but I hope to get back on schedule, or at least nearer to it, by December 1.

Because my attention has been drawn elsewhere the past month, I have postponed two articles. If the Lord wills, I will continue the series of articles on the Grace of God in the next issue, and we would like to consider the question of "good teaching" in more depth. Particularly, we would like to investigate our responsibilities in a case of sincere disagreement – moments when both parties seem to have a solid, biblical basis for their perspective. How do we discern the truth, and how do we preserve respect and brotherhood in the process?

I appreciate your patience, and I pray that God will work in us and through us to accomplish His will on earth.

- M. S.

Bible Interpretation, No. 4

Introduction

Now that we have learned what kind of book we are studying and familiarized ourselves with translations – the most basic study tool available to us – it is time to move beyond simple observation of the text into active interpretation. We have learned how to see what a passage says, but what

does it mean? This can be a rather complicated question, particularly when we view paragraphs, chapters, and books of Scripture as a whole, rather than individual verses. Therefore, it is helpful for us to break our study up into distinct interpretive questions that will help us reason through the content and purpose of any passage of Scripture.

The questions that we ask of each passage will vary depending on its content. In essence, we are trying to identify what we hope to learn as we study the passage *before* we begin our research in earnest. Not only will this process give us direction in our study, but it will help us to focus our efforts on what is most helpful to our understanding. For example, rather than conducting a thorough word study on *every single word* in the Bible – a method that would certainly take more time and energy than any of us could possibly muster – the time we take to identify the most important words and phrases, as well as those that are most easily misunderstood will help us use our time efficiently without failing to address an important part of the passage.

Below, we will consider four types of interpretive questions that we can use to focus our study of any passage in the Bible¹. It is not essential to know the answers to our questions at this stage, nor do we even need to know *how* to answer a question that we ask. We are simply identifying what we need to know in order to understand the passage fully.

1 – Questions of Content

These are questions that are designed to clarify what the text says, literally speaking. Here, we will identify notable words that require special attention, whether because they function as key words in the passage, because translations disagree about their meaning, or because their meaning is complicated or unclear to us or to our audience (if we have a sermon in view). In the example we considered in the last lesson, we could identify a

¹ These four types are adapted from Richard Alan Fuhr Jr. and Andreas J. Köstenberger's *Inductive Bible Study*, (Nashville, B&H Academic: 2016), 74-99.

number of words that may require our attention, if we wish to understand the passage fully:

*“There is also an **antitype** which now saves us—**baptism** (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the **answer** of a **good conscience** toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21, NKJV).*

We might formulate our questions as follows:

- What is an “antitype”?
- What is “baptism”?
- How should the word translated “answer” in the NKJV be understood, since it is given a different meaning in various translations?
- What does a “good conscience” signify? Does it involve the forgiveness of sins, a proper outlook toward our sins, or something else?

Most questions of content will focus on the language used in the passage, since our first duty is to ensure that we understand what the author really said. However, there are also some issues of content that rely on the historical and contextual situation, for example:

- Who is speaking in this passage?
- Who is the audience?
- What circumstances provide the background for this passage’s message?
- What genre was this passage written in? Is it poetry, or prose? A letter, or a historical narrative?
- Does this passage use any figurative language?

These kinds of questions will help us to ground the meaning of the passage in its real context. This is important, particularly in poetic literature and historical literature, where we may come across figures of speech that do not carry their literal meaning, or statements and arguments made by

individuals opposed to God and His plan. To understand these passages properly, we must know these background details.

2 – Questions of Relationship

These questions are designed to clarify the flow of the biblical book leading up to and growing out of our selected passage. Here, we will identify themes and words that are used throughout the context of the passage, as well as the role our specific verse or group of verses plays in the author's overarching message. Consider our same example with more context:

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit,¹⁹ by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison,²⁰ who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.²¹ There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to Him.

4 Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Peter 3:18-4:1, NKJV).

And our questions:

- How does baptism, an *antitype* of the flood, correspond to the work of God in Noah's lifetime?
- What point is Peter making about salvation in this passage?
- How does baptism relate to Christ's suffering and our own suffering?

Note that we are not asking content questions about other verses in this passage, although there are many that should be asked before we can understand every verse in its own right. Our study is focused particularly

on verse 21 and the role it plays in the passage as a unit. What does verse 21 bring to the discussion? How does this verse help Peter to prove that suffering in this life is worthwhile to Christians, who have been saved through Jesus' suffering?

These kinds of questions help us to reach beyond the direct meaning of an individual verse and move toward a broader view of the whole passage. Why is our verse important, and what does it accomplish in its context?

3 – Questions of Intention

These questions help us to understand the purpose behind the composition of each passage. The most prominent word in these kinds of questions will be “why?” Why did the author address this subject? Why did he use these words to do so? Why did he mention each detail, and why did he leave out another? Since God could have revealed to us any information about anything, it is important to discern why He chose to tell us what He did in the way that He did. Consider our example yet again:

“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21, NKJV).

Our questions:

- Why does Peter establish the relationship between the flood and baptism? Is the illustration of the flood meant to clarify baptism, or baptism meant to clarify the flood? Or are both meant to illustrate another principle altogether?
- Why does Peter specify that baptism has a spiritual effect, not a physical one? How does that serve his purpose?
- Is the passage designed to clarify the connection between baptism and Jesus' resurrection, or does Peter bring up the connection to serve another purpose?

These questions help us to delve further into the passage than observation alone can allow. We might know what a passage says inside and out, but if

we never ask about the author's intention, we will never understand why the content matters.

4 – Questions of Implication

These questions move beyond the meaning of the passage individually and on to their impact on how we understand other passages that discuss the same themes. They also may affect our application of this verse or of others in our Christian lives. Consider once again:

“There is also an antitype which now saves us—baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21, NKJV).

Now our questions:

- Does this verse imply that salvation occurs through baptism?
- If Peter here identifies the power of baptism as the resurrection of Christ, what does that imply about the baptism of John (e.g. Mark 1:4-5)?
- If the power of baptism is not in the physical act of washing, does that imply that the method of baptism (i.e. immersion vs. sprinkling) does not matter, or is there still a significance to the physical action of immersion (see, for example, Romans 6:3-5)?

These are the most difficult questions to answer because they often require a thorough study of multiple passage to clarify their relationship. Nonetheless, they are essential if we are to understand the whole revelation of God in every verse of Scripture.

Conclusion

The questions we have drawn out of 1 Peter 3:21 are by no means comprehensive, but they serve as a sample for how we can structure our study going forward. Once we compile all of these questions into a list, we will have a collection of distinct items that we can reason through and

research, each of which will bring us one step closer to a full understanding of that verse.

- M. S.

Call on the Name of the Lord, Part 2

In Part 1 of our study, we examined the origin and history of man calling on the name of the Lord. We began with the story of Cain and Abel, and Cain's rejection of God. This contrasted with Seth, who established a faithful relationship with God in his family, who began to call on the name of the Lord. This tradition continued through Abraham and his family until the practice was formally adopted and defined in the law given to Moses. When God's people were faithful to worship and serve Him according to His will, His grace was abundant toward them.

With God's blessings came responsibilities. His law regulated every aspect of Hebrew life. The law told them how to worship, how to interact with each other, established the priesthood and all the ceremony that went with it. It also regulated the use of His name.

The third commandment says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold *him* guiltless who takes His name in vain" (Exodus 20:7, NKJV). What does it mean to use God's name in vain? People often explain the meaning as something close to "don't use God's name," which is simplistic and insufficient. The commandment certainly prohibits using God's name in any casual, disrespectful, or profane way; His name is holy and must be kept that way (Psalm 111:9). Commentators offer a variety of opinions. A common understanding is a prohibition against using God's name in oaths, to commit perjury or make false statements. This is consistent with Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:33-37.

Before committing to a particular explanation, we should consider the purpose of the commandment. The first four commandments regulated

the Hebrews' relationship with God. The first established His supremacy in their lives. He was their God, they were His people, there was no other God, they belonged to Him (Exodus 6:7). The second commandment put Him before all else in their lives. He alone was to be worshipped; nothing could replace Him.

The third regulated the use of His name. His name was to be kept holy. He was to be worshipped. The context suggests the third commandment included more than a prohibition on false swearing. As God's people, the Israelites would use His name, as their ancestors had done in the past: in worship, prayer, giving of thanks, or times of distress. Familiarity from repeated use can lead to casual use.

Names have purpose. They are used for identification, to distinguish one person from another. Whether we refer to God, the Lord, or Jehovah, it should be done appropriately with proper reverence and respect.

The words 'my God', or variations of them, are not sinful to use. That is determined by the manner in which they are used. If a child of God uses them in an expression of praise, prayerfully, or in a genuine appeal to Him, it is an appropriate use, as Thomas cried out "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28, NKJV). Problems arise when the words are used with no consideration for their meaning. First, 'my God' implies a relationship. Is He really mine? Does my life reflect the fact that I have devoted myself to His service? It is a very common expression, used often by people who have no other connection to Him except through the vain use of His name. Second, it is an invocation of His power or authority. Nobody cries out 'my George Washington' when startled, because it's a ridiculous thing to say. President Washington was a great man but there is no power or authority behind his name. Therein lies the vanity. People simply do not think through the consequence of their words. When God's name is invoked in such a way there is a consequence because there will be a response. When a child calls out to a parent they do so based on a need, expecting an answer, but a child calling out your name for no reason

becomes an annoyance. God expects us to call on His name with purpose, not thoughtlessly or out of bad habit. This is vanity.

Second, names have authority. Children learn this at an early age. If two brothers are misbehaving, and their sister tells them to stop, the boys are likely to laugh at her, possibly worse. But if she goes to them and says, “mom said to stop,” they may not like it, but they are much more likely to stop. She has invoked the authority of a name, the one who makes rules for their lives. God’s word regulated every part of the Hebrews’ lives. Their authority for crossing the Jordan river and possessing the land of Canaan came from God’s commandment. When they conquered any nation, they did so under His authority.

His word was their authority in civil matters. If one neighbor stole from another, the law prescribed a remedy. But if someone took matters into his own hand, he was operating outside God’s authority and could be liable for any violation of the law. He could no longer invoke the authority of God as justification for his actions.

The Hebrews’ worship was defined in the law. The times, places, and types of sacrifices were laid out in God’s word. To be acceptable, these rules had to be followed. Jesus found the Jews guilty of replacing the law with their own commandments, making their worship vain (Matthew 15:9). They could not call on the name of the Lord while practicing what He had not authorized.

God strictly guarded the authority of His name. He told Moses,

“I will raise up for them a Prophet like you from among their brethren, and will put My words in His mouth, and He shall speak to them all that I command Him. 19 And it shall be that whoever will not hear My words, which He speaks in My name, I will require it of him. 20 But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in My name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that prophet shall die.” (Deuteronomy 18:18-20, NKJV)

The vain use of the Lord's name by the prophets was punished by death. Through Jeremiah He condemned those who lied in His name (14:14-15, 23:25, 27:15, 29:21-23).

Third, names identify a relationship. In western culture we have a first and last name, the given and surname. This identifies you as an individual within a family. Typically, when a woman marries, she takes on her husband's last name. They become one flesh (Genesis 2:24) and create their own home under a shared name. Their children take on the family name as well. This relationship is accompanied with all manner of legal rights and responsibilities, all because you are associated with a name.

However, assuming a name without authority has no value. You might change your last name to Walton, move to Bentonville, Arkansas, and show up at a Walton family reunion, but they're not going to add you as an heir to that family's Walmart fortune. You have no right to the name, you were not born or adopted into the family. You are a fraud and will be treated as one.

Abram's relationship with God was one of adoption (Romans 9:4).

- He was told to "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house" (Genesis 12:1, NKJV), leaving him with no family.
- God promised him a place to live (Genesis 12:7, 13:15), an heir (Genesis 15:4), and a new family (Genesis 15:5).
- God made a covenant with him and his descendants (Genesis 15, 17).
- Their names were changed to Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:5,15).
- He declared Himself to be their God (Genesis 17:8).

- As His people they were called by His name (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Because Abraham was faithful and followed God's commandments through all those years, he and his descendants were able to wear God's name. God commanded him to "walk before Me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1, NKJV). He and his descendants were to keep His covenant (Genesis 17:9).

What about us? Paul wrote that God "predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself" (Ephesians 1:5, NKJV).

- The Corinthians were told to "Come out from among them and be separate" (2 Corinthians 6:17, NKJV).
- Jesus said His gospel would sometimes divide people from their family, friends, and home (Matthew 10:16-23).
- Jesus brought a kingdom for His people (Matthew 16:18) and gave them a new family (1 John 3:1).
- Jesus mediates a new covenant (Hebrews 12:24).
- "I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (2 Corinthians 6:16, NKJV).
- Jesus' disciples are called Christians, wearing His name (Acts 11:26, 1 Peter 4:16).

Centuries before Isaiah prophesied that "The Gentiles shall see your righteousness, And all kings your glory. You shall be called by a new name, Which the mouth of the Lord will name" (Isaiah 62:2, NKJV). Centuries before that the Lord change Jacob's name to Israel, variously defined as wrestler with God or warrior of God, but always including God. Thus the identity of Abraham's family, those in covenant relationship with God, was centered in the name of God. In like manner God gave us the name Christian, literally, follower of Christ.

What may we conclude? God has provide mankind with a tremendous opportunity. Through the death, burial and resurrection of His Son we can be adopted into His family and wear the name of Christ, but we must not wear it in vain. As we have seen there are several ways to take or use the Lord's name in vain.

- Inappropriate use in our speech, or false swearing.
- Claiming the Lord's authority for our actions, including worship He has not authorized. We cannot do anything in His name which He does not approve.
- Associating ourselves with God and His people if we have not been adopted into His family. You cannot wear the name Christian if you have not obeyed His gospel.

We should be careful and thoughtful about our relationship with God. He takes that relationship very seriously, so should we.

- **Lance Stallcop**

A New Translation of 1 Corinthians 4

"So let a man consider us to be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. What is more, it is required that stewards be found trustworthy. But it is a very small thing to me if I should be judged by you or by human judgments; rather, I will not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, but I am not justified in this. The one who judges me is the Lord. For this reason, do not judge anything before the right time has arrived – until our Lord shall come, who will illuminate what is shrouded by darkness and will reveal the purposes of our hearts; and then each one will receive praise from God.

Now brothers, I have applied these things to myself and to Apollos for your benefit, so that you might learn through us not to go beyond what has been written – so that none of you may become conceited in favor of one against the other. Who then is separating

you? What do you have that was not given to you by another? If it was given to you, why do you boast as if you had obtained it yourself?

You are already full, you are rich, you have ruled as kings without us; and I wish that you really had ruled, so that we also could reign with you. For it seems to me that God has made us, the apostles, to be a final demonstration — as if we are condemned to death — because we have been made into a spectacle for the world, for both angels and men. We are foolish for Christ, yet you are wise in Christ; we are weak, yet you are strong; you are honorable, and yet we are without honor. Even now, we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed, and we are beaten; we are homeless, and we work with our own hands. We bless when we are cursed, we endure when we are persecuted, we offer comfort when we are slandered; we have been made to be like the refuse of the world, the offscouring of everything, even now!

I do not write these things because I want to shame you, but rather as instructions for beloved children. For even if you have ten thousand tutors in Christ, you do not have many fathers; for I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Therefore, I urge you to become imitators of me. For this reason, I have sent Timothy to you, who is a beloved child to me and faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, just as I teach everywhere in every church.

Some of you are conceited, as if you believe that I will not come to you again, but I will come to you quickly if the Lord is willing. Then, I will not experience what these conceited brethren have said, but rather their power, for the kingdom of God does not consist of words but of power. What do you want? Do you want me to come to you with a rod of correction, or in love with a spirit of gentleness?"

Notes on the Translation

6: “Not to go beyond what has been written...” — The NIV, NRSV, and Martin Luther’s translation take this to be a quoted saying, for example: “So that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, ‘Nothing beyond what is written.’” (NRSV). I do not see that there is any difference in meaning if this was a well-known saying, or simply Paul’s encouragement to the Corinthians in this place.

7: *“What do you have that was not given to you by another? If it was given to you, why do you boast as if you had obtained it yourself?”* – These questions are rendered more literally in most translations: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (NASB 1995). I have changed the wording a little to preserve the emphasis in English. If we have received something, it was given to us by someone else. If we have not received it, then we have obtained it by ourselves. These questions emphasize the fact that the Corinthians had not accomplished anything by their own power, but they had to rely on God.

- M. S.

That You Might Learn Through Us...

Notes on 1 Corinthians 4

Introduction

In the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul has described the path to Christian unity. God chose to save us through the foolishness of the cross – a plan that could never have been produced by human logic – so that every Christian must humble himself and recognize the shortcomings of his own wisdom and strength. This common humility in Christ forces each of us to give up the things that could elevate us over another. There is no division between one group or another, for we all must learn from Christ. Apart from Him, we know nothing. Apart from Him, we could accomplish nothing. Christ is the power of God that lifts us out of our weakness, and the Spirit is the wisdom of God which trains us to think like God and to view the world through His eyes. We find our unity in Christ, not in our own abilities. Those who grow to great wisdom and strength through Him remain His servants, and nothing more. They have not achieved their status by themselves, but only because God saw fit to train them and to equip them.

Paul concludes this line of thought in chapter 4 by applying his teachings directly to the Corinthians, particularly in their relationship with him. The congregation at Corinth had failed to safeguard their unity – they had failed even to comprehend what they had received in Christ. They wanted to be better than each other, and so they lost sight of the true purpose of the gospel and of their congregation.

1-5

Paul resumes his thoughts from chapter 3 directly – “For this reason, let a man consider us...” Paul seems to be referring to himself and to Apollos here, so that the Corinthians will look at the two of them as they really were. They were not great, wise, or strong men, they were simply servants of Christ who had been entrusted with knowledge. The power they wielded was not their own – they were acting on Christ’s behalf. They had not unraveled the mysteries of the universe on their own – the Spirit had told them what was hidden. Therefore, they had responsibility, and they did deserve respect as God’s faithful servants, but their status was not their own.

This standing in relation to Christ meant that Paul and Apollos could not use their power and wisdom according to their own desires. If we are servants and stewards, we must be faithful to our master – otherwise our responsibilities will be taken away from us. Paul had become wise according to the Scriptures, but he could only use that wisdom in line with Christ’s instructions to him.

This meant that Paul’s conduct could not be judged by anyone other than the Lord Himself. He understood his instructions, but he was not in a position to decide whether he had fulfilled them or not. The Corinthians did not have the authority or perspective to judge him, nor did anyone else except for the Lord. Paul, like everyone else, will have to wait until the day of judgment to hear the Lord’s assessment of his work. The Lord will not only assess the things that Paul said and did, but also the “purposes of our hearts,” the reasons why we make the decisions that we do. Paul drew a

distinction in the last chapter between someone who honestly and sincerely makes a mistake, but is willing and able to grow from it, and someone who deliberately causes harm to the church of God. These passages show that God will not only ask *what* we have done, but also *why* we have done it. Both factors will affect whether we receive praise from God in the end.

6-7

Here, Paul explains why he has spent so much time talking about himself and Apollos, and their relationship to God and to the church in Corinth – he wanted them to understand the principles of how we work with God in Christ so that they could apply it to themselves. It is always easier to discern the truth of a matter when we are not emotionally involved in the outcome. Paul tells the Corinthians that this whole conversation has really been about certain Christians who had become “conceited in favor of one against the other,” but he did not discuss their names or their conceit directly, since he knew that they would react emotionally to such a direct rebuke. Instead, he used himself and Apollos as examples so that they could agree with him easily and now, at the end of the discussion, he is asking them to put themselves into his shoes. “You can see that my role as a servant and a steward of God gives me both humility and responsibility. Doesn’t the same lesson apply to you and your role toward God and your fellow Christians?”

Paul tells the Corinthians that he wants them to learn “not to go beyond what has been written.” This is what it means to learn from the Spirit of God. God has revealed His unknowable thoughts through His Spirit, and these thoughts have been recorded for us in the written Scriptures. If we commit ourselves to knowing only what the Spirit has made available to us, then we cannot make rules or judgments that are not found in Scripture. This is not to say that a mature Christian cannot learn to exercise his rational judgment to apply the teachings of Scripture to a decision not explicitly mentioned in its pages, since this application of wisdom is fully based on what is written, but it means that we should learn to use the Word of God according to its own purpose. God trusts us, and He has given us the instructions that we need to accomplish His work. It would not be proper

for us to change or add to His instructions, nor to use the tools we find in Scripture for a purpose other than His.

When we adopt this outlook on our work as Christians, Paul's questions in verse 7 make a lot of sense. If we are all serving God's purpose with the tools and knowledge that God has entrusted to our care, what difference can there really be between us? We serve the same God, and we have only what He has given to us. If one of us is given a more prominent role, it is only because he has been entrusted with that role, not because he has achieved it himself. He cannot boast because God remains the source of his glory.

8-13

Despite this fact, the Corinthian Christians had boasted. They had made themselves into something great. They had acted as though they were kings. They were not willing to submit themselves to the humility that their role as servants and stewards demanded of them. Paul's wish, that "we (the apostles) also could reign with you," seems to express a degree of sympathy toward the Corinthians on Paul's part. From a human perspective, it would be nice if our service to God held the promise of a certain degree of comfort – of elevation above the hate and suffering of the world. However, when Paul compared the Corinthians' idea of spiritual maturity to the life that the apostles led, it was clear that they were pursuing two separate ideals.

Paul speaks of the apostles as a final demonstration – a spectacle for the world. Perhaps this demonstration was designed to communicate the same message as Jesus' death on the cross, which Paul has described already in this book. Perhaps the fact that God worked through such simple, weak, and often pitiable people to accomplish His great miracles was meant to show once more that His victory will not depend on human abilities. In any case, it was clear when one examined the apostles and the Corinthians that the two groups led very different lives. The one was characterized by humility, foolishness, and weakness, while the other paraded its honor, wisdom, and strength.

14-17

Paul did not write about the apostles' humility to prove that they were *better* than the Corinthians – he did not want to do any harm to the congregation there. Rather, he pointed out the disparity between their attitudes to bring their attention to an area where they needed to grow. Paul shared a special bond with the Corinthian church; he was their father in Christ. They had believed through his teaching and through the miracles God had worked through him. As a father, Paul did not want to ridicule them or discourage their growth, but he wanted to see them reach the same level of maturity that he had. This meant that he needed to rebuke them from time to time and give them instruction at other times. In this case, since he could not be there personally, he sent Timothy as his representative. Timothy was a faithful servant, and he would be able to guide the Corinthians in the right direction, the same as Paul had done in every congregation where he had labored.

18-21

Paul perceived that some of the conceit that troubled the congregation in Corinth was based on the thought that they had “outgrown” him and his teachings. Rather than becoming imitators of the humility and commitment that Paul embodied, some teachers believed that they could set a new trend, one that they liked better. They believed that they would not have to face Paul, nor come to terms with the disparity between their actions and the gospel of Christ. They thought that their new direction was here to stay.

But Paul promised to them that he would come to correct the congregation's trajectory, and it was up to them to determine the tone of his visit. They could fight against Paul and against the gospel – but what power did they have that could resist the power of God? This kind of defiance would only result in a harsher correction. Instead, Paul encouraged them to reconsider their words and their actions. It would be better for them if he could work in love with a spirit of gentleness, so that he could calmly and patiently guide them in the right direction.

Conclusion

These verses set the tone for the rest of the letter. Paul has explained the strife in Corinth in conceptual terms – namely, the Christians there had grown conceited and eschewed the humility that a life in God’s service demands. He has shown a better pattern of behavior in himself and in Apollos, and he has encouraged them to change their outlook to imitate the same pattern. Paul’s promise that he would come to Corinth and correct the congregation’s course, whatever it took, should have given them the push that they needed to read the rest of the letter with an open mind, ready to receive guidance on how to solve the questions and arguments that had torn the congregation apart.

- M. S.

A New Translation of Mark 2:1-22

“Then, after he had come into Capernaum again, it was heard that he was in a house. Then the crowd pressed together so that the house could no longer contain it, not even at the door, and He spoke the word to them. And some came, carrying a paralytic to him; there were four men who carried him. And they were not able to come close to him because the crowd, so they removed the roof where he was. When they had finished digging through, they let down the bed where the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Child, your sins have been forgiven.’

Now some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ‘Why is he speaking this way? He is blaspheming; who is able to forgive sins except God alone?’

And immediately, when Jesus knew in His spirit that they reasoned this way within themselves, He said to them, ‘Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to tell the paralytic, ‘Your sins have been forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Arise, pick up your bed, and walk?’ Therefore, so that you may know that the Son of man has the authority to forgive sins on earth...’ and he said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, pick up your bed, and go back to your house.’ Then he got up, and immediately took up

his bed and walked out in front of the whole crowd, so that all were astonished and praised God, saying, 'We have never seen something like this!'

He went out to the sea again; the whole crowd also came to Him, and He was teaching them. And as He passed by, He saw Levi, the son of Alphaeus, sitting in the tax-booth and said to him, 'Follow me.' And he stood up and followed him.

And it happened that He sat to eat in Levi's house, and many tax collectors and sinners sat down with Jesus and His disciples; for they were many, and they followed Him. And the Pharisee scribes, when they saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, said to His disciples, 'Why does He eat with tax collectors and sinners?'

Then, when Jesus heard, He said to them, 'The strong do not have need of a physician, but the sick do have a need. I did not come to call the righteous, but to call sinners.'

And the disciples of John and the Pharisees were fasting. They came, saying to Him, 'Why do the disciples of John and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?'

And Jesus said to them, 'Are the friends of the bridegroom able to fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as the bridegroom is with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast on that day. Nobody sews a patch made of new cloth onto an old piece of clothing; otherwise, the patch will pull away from the garment, the new from the old, and the tear will be made worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the wineskins and both wine and wineskin will be destroyed. Rather, new wine is for new wineskins.'

Note

We will consider the rest of Mark 2, verses 23-28, together with the first 12 verses of Mark 3 in the next issue. This is because both passages deal with Jesus' work and the Sabbath, so it makes more sense to discuss them together.

- M. S.

Not for the Righteous

Comments on Mark 2:1-22

Introduction

The first chapter of Mark's gospel provided some basic information about who Jesus was and what he had come to accomplish. We saw how His teaching differed from any other rabbi that the Jews had known before, and how His claims were backed up with real power. In the second chapter, Mark continues to show how remarkable Jesus' power and His wisdom really were, and ultimately how these led to conflict between Him and the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day. In verses 1-22, Mark presents the character of Jesus' ministry in three narratives, each of which reveals the joy and mercy that could be found in His gospel.

1-12

First, Mark recounts the faith of a paralytic and his friends, who trusted that Jesus had the power to heal him. When they were not able to reach Him directly, since the house was so densely packed with people listening to Jesus teach, they did not become discouraged. If anything, this seems to have strengthened their determination to see Him. They climbed onto the roof and cleared away the roofing material so that they could lower their friend directly into Jesus' presence.

When this processed was finished, Jesus only added wonder to an already remarkable scene when He did not immediately heal the man who had been brought to Him for that purpose. Instead, He proclaimed to the paralytic that his sins had been forgiven. On the surface, from a modern, Christian perspective, this is not all that remarkable. We know that Jesus came to forgive us of our sins, and we know that the Bible teaches that He has the power to accomplish this feat. However, Mark was likely writing to an audience who had never heard of Jesus before. This claim to authority would surely stand out – Jesus has the power to wipe away every record of everything wrong that you have ever done. He can offer you a brand-new

life, free from the consequences of the old one. He can offer you something that no man has the power to offer.

Considering the revolutionary nature of this claim, it is not surprising that the scribes objected to what Jesus had said. In effect, they were right. No man could forgive another of his sins, and it would be blasphemous to claim that power without a commission from God. This is why Jesus took the opportunity to teach the audience, rather than to argue with them. It is true, He said, that no one who does not have the authority of God can forgive someone of their sins, and yet it is easy for someone to claim that level of authority. We cannot see physically whether our sins have been forgiven or not. This is a fact that exists in the mind of God. For this reason, it would be proper to ask for some kind of proof that Jesus really could forgive sins. He needed to prove that He really did wield the power and authority of God.

This is why Jesus chose this opportunity to teach His authority. Here, in this moment, He could be tested. He demonstrated conclusively that His word was effective when He told the paralytic man to get up and walk.. His will could reshape the universe. Since He allowed Himself to be tested in a way that could easily be verified, the crowd learned that they could trust Him when they could not yet see what He promised. Jesus made no unsubstantiated claims.

13-17

Next, Mark describes the call of Levi, who was also called Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13). Levi was a tax collector who apparently worked in a tax office between Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee, since it seems that Jesus passed by him as He walked to the sea. Jesus' call to Levi is told in a very matter-of-fact way, which betrays Levi's faith. Jesus simply told him to come, and so he did. Jesus used no persuasive tactics, and Levi offered no resistance.

Levi represented a despised, though wealthy class of society in Jesus' day. The Roman government preferred to hire local residents as tax collectors

instead of sending Roman officials. The tax collectors were responsible to pay the total sum up front, which bought them the right to collect taxes from their fellow citizens in the name of the Roman government. This arrangement gave them incentive to collect enough money to recoup their initial investment. However, the only way for them to make a profit was to overcharge those they taxed. Many took this as an opportunity to satisfy their greed, since they could extort tremendous sums of money from their countrymen with the backing of the Roman government. This arrangement caused Jewish society to view tax collectors as, essentially, robbers².

Because tax collectors were viewed so negatively, many members of society refused to have any social contact with them. This is why the Pharisee scribes objected to the fact that Jesus went to Levi's house to share a meal with Levi's friends, tax collectors and sinners. To their view, there was no good reason for a respectable teacher to spend any time in friendly company with sinners.

But Jesus had no intention of preserving His image as a respectable member of society. The context seems to indicate that Levi brought his friends together because of his faith in Christ – he wanted them to experience the same forgiveness and hope that he had found in his Savior. Jesus was there with them for their benefit; they needed Him. In His response to the Pharisees, Jesus made it clear that He had not come to congratulate those who had kept themselves righteous, especially those who were only keeping a pretense of righteousness. Instead, He had come to reach out to those who were lost, to reach those who were in pain, and to forgive those who knew they had sinned against God. Logically, He needed to make Himself available to them.

18-22

The Pharisees and the disciples of John the Baptist were still not satisfied with Jesus. These groups fasted often – they would designate a length of

² Jeffrey E. Miller, "Tax Collector," in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2016). Logos.

time when they would not eat or drink to demonstrate their commitment to God and to show their self-control and independence from the material world. For many, it was a way to express grief. It seems that some Jews, including the Pharisees, would make a show of how often they fasted to prove their righteousness (Matthew 6:16-18, Luke 18:9-14). From a human perspective, then, it seemed like Jesus' disciples were less righteous than those of John and of the Pharisees. These fasted often, while Jesus' disciples did not fast at all. This was an accusation against Jesus' ability as a leader and a teacher – what kind of teacher produces disciples who have no respect for righteousness?

Jesus' response to this accusation did not condemn the Pharisees or John, but rather put His own disciples' actions into perspective. Fasting is a tool that serves a specific purpose, and it does not make sense to use it for a purpose it was never designed to fill. Fasting expressed grief, so how could it be a proper response to a joyous occasion? Would someone refuse to join in the feast at a wedding? Wouldn't that be considered rude and an inappropriate response to the occasion? It wasn't that Jesus' disciples were unwilling to fast, or less righteous than their brethren. They simply did not have a good reason to fast.

Jesus illustrated this point with two brief parables. First, He appealed to common wisdom when it comes to repairing an old piece of clothing. Cloth shrinks as it ages, and so it does not make sense to use a piece of unshrunk cloth as a patch for an old garment. The results, as Jesus described them, would be disastrous for the garment. This isn't to say that there is no use for a piece of new cloth, only that it should be applied in the proper context.

The same is true of new wine and old wineskins. In Israel at this time, wine was stored in a vessel made of animal skin. It seems that new wine – that is, unfermented wine – was poured directly into such a skin to ferment. This process would produce expanding gasses, which would pressurize the interior of the flask. If someone used an old, worn-out wineskin, there was a danger that this pressure would cause the skin to burst open, pouring out the wine and rendering the skin unusable. For someone who was familiar

with this process, this was a question of common sense. You use the right tools for the right context.

Both parables illustrate the point that Jesus made regarding His disciples' fasting. Fasting, among others, is a tool of religious expression. It is not wrong in itself, but God does not want us to fast for the sake of fasting. He wants us to use sense and purpose in our service to Him. Our religion is not designed to demonstrate our righteousness to the world, but to train us how to properly respond to each challenge and context. The disciples would not fast while they were joyful, but Jesus promised that a time would come when He would be taken away – then, they would have cause for mourning.

- **M. S.**

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