

# False Teachings on Obscure Passages

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Now we are continuing in 1 Peter, and I am trying to be honest and teach all of it, and not do like the commentaries do, skip the hard places. This that I bring to you today is a hard passage of Scripture. Peter might very well have had himself in mind when he said that Paul was in the habit of writing things very hard to be understood, in which the unstable and the unlearned wrested it to their own destruction.

Peter said that about Paul, but he might have said it about himself, because he did give us something very difficult here. Let me read it. Verse 18 of chapter 3, For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit, by which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison, which sometimes were disobedient, when once the long-suffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark of God was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.

The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ; Who is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God; angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.

Verse 6 of chapter 4, For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. Now, verses 21 and 22, where it tells us about baptism being a figure and a good conscience toward God and the resurrection of Christ, verse 22 that tells us of Christ's ascension and His high place of authority over angels and powers, these I am not going to mention inasmuch as we have dealt with this quite fully.

So, I am to speak about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison, verse 6, to them that are dead. And I will say that there is more in this this morning for the curious than there is for the spiritually hungry. But I am still not going to pass it up for a number of reasons.

One is that the passage is here by divine inspiration. And if it had not been intended that we should expound it, or attempt to expound it, or attempt to understand it, it would not have been put here. There are obscure passages in the Scripture, but even those obscure passages were divinely inspired and for that reason need to be treated with respect, even if we are not able fully to understand them.

Now, the second reason that I am going to courageously attempt an exposition here is that I want our people to be fully informed. We cannot be informed fully if we skip the hard places, and major only in the Scriptures it can be understood.

And third, and I think this is the most important of the three, that false teachers specialize on difficult texts. Heresy always thrives in obscurity or on obscure passages and dies when the full light of God reaches it.

Let us take such a passage as 1 Corinthians, where it talks about the baptizing for the dead. Now, it tells us there that, verse 29, "...else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead? If the dead rise not at all, why are they then baptized for the dead?"

Now, Paul put that there, and nobody knows exactly what is meant by it. And certainly, he did not approve it. He only used it casually as an arguing point for a future life. But there are those who practice baptism for the dead. And if you object to it as being unscriptural, they quote you that obscure and difficult passage from 1 Corinthians 15. And they say, why would you object when there were those in Corinth that baptized for the dead? So, they make a whole doctrine to rest upon one verse.

Let me give you a good working rule for the understanding of Scripture. If you haven't more than one verse to support it, don't teach it. Because if it isn't found in more than one verse of the Bible, the chances are it isn't found there either. And that what you think is a passage teaching a certain thing does not teach it at all.

Now, suppose that I were going to argue for the future life, and I were writing to people who practice masses for the dead, and I were to say to them, how can you deny the future life when you practice saying mass for the dead? I would be saying to them, in effect, now you yourself admit a future life because you are acting as though those persons who had died were still in existence. Therefore, you yourself believe in a future life, and your very practice of saying masses proves it. But that wouldn't mean that I approved saying masses for the dead. It would only show that I was arguing that they believed in a future life by the fact that they attempted to help people in the future life.

Now, that's all Paul meant here. Paul did not in any wise practice baptism for the dead, nor did he exhort anybody to do it, nor is there one line in the Bible that teaches it. But he appeals to something they already, some of them at least, did and believed to show how inconsistent they were in saying that there was no resurrection. And it's obvious that the same persons who said there was no resurrection were the same ones who practiced baptism for the dead.

And then take that famous passage, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Now, that's obviously an obscure passage. I have never heard it satisfactorily explained, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you open will stay open, whatever you close will be closed.

Now, isn't it queer that our Roman Catholic friends will deny that the Bible has any authority over the Church on the grounds that the Bible came out of the Church and not the Church out of the Bible? And they will deny whole sections of Scripture because they say, well, you don't understand it, and beside that it isn't binding upon us because the Bible is a daughter of the Church and not the Church a daughter of the Bible, therefore the Bible has no authority over the Church.

But if you complain that the Pope is not Christ's vicegerent on earth, they will run to that obscure passage, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom, and they say, how dare you deny the Bible? Why, the Bible says, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom, and that was Peter, and this Pope is a descendant of Peter. I don't know how

we get that way, but false teaching always hunts an obscure passage, always hunts an obscure passage.

Which reminds me of the Mormon missionary that was traveling, and somebody said, you believe in a plurality of wives, how do you do with that passage that says let a bishop be the husband of one wife? He said that means at least one. He had it explained anyhow. Well, heresy always hunts obscurity, and false teaching always hunts the difficult text.

You see, my brethren, it is like if I were to take you to my farm, if I had a farm, and I would say to you, now here you will find apples and peaches and grapes, and here are watermelons and cantaloupes and sweet potatoes. And I would name 15 or 20 edible fruits or vegetables or grains and say, now this is all yours, take over. And I would come back a month later and find my guests half starved, and when I would say to them, what's the matter, you look undernourished? They would say, well, we are undernourished because we have found a plant that we can't identify. There is a plant behind the old oak stump back there near the end of the far field just over the hill, and we have spent one month trying to identify this plant.

But I would say, you're starving, you look sick, you'll get TB. What's the matter with you? And they would say, well, we're worried about this one verse, this one plant. And that's exactly what a lot of God's children do. They starve themselves to death knee-deep in clover because there's one little old plant back of a stump in the rear end of the field that they can't identify.

And heretics always starve you to death while they worry you to death about that one obscure passage of Scripture. So I'm going to root out this passage in order that nobody will come and worry you with it and say that they know what it means and therefore try to prove that you're wrong.

Now, what this verse doesn't teach, or these verses does and do not teach, they do not teach universalism. You know universalism is the belief in the restitution of all fallen beings to a state of blessedness. Some of them believe only in the restoration of all human beings to blessedness, not only Christians, but all human beings finally to blessedness.

Then there is another kind of more exhaustive universalism which teaches not only the restitution of all human beings, but the devil and all the fallen angels. They're very generous and take in everything, every human and every creature that has fallen and sinned against God.

Now this is a dream born of desire. And this universalism, the teaching that every moral creature would finally be saved, is a dream born of desire. And it springs from humanitarian motives, no doubt. Humanitarian feelings within the breast lead us to desire the salvation of all, but it is not taught in the Scriptures. The Bible specifically states that except we repent we shall all likewise perish. And it pictures us a hell where the devil and his angels are, and where all that are not found in the Book of Life are finally consigned.

So, the teaching of the Bible is definitely not universalism. And whatever this passage teaches, which I have read in your hearing, it does not teach universalism. And second, it does not teach a second chance.

Now the Russellites, I do not call them Jehovah's Witnesses because I do not want to soil that Holy Name by identifying it with any false teachers. But the Russellites teach that there is a second chance. They say that everybody that dies will have a chance in the future world. And then if he turns down that chance, he will be annihilated. He will cease to be.

When a sinner dies, he sleeps in the earth, body and soul, in a state of deep unconsciousness. And then when the resurrection comes, he will be raised and given another chance. If he turns down that chance, then he will be annihilated and cease to be, and there will be no hell. Now that is what the Russellites teach. And of course they will hold up in passages like this.

But this error thrives on difficult texts. It cannot stand the full white light of the Bible. It cannot stand the teachings of Jesus. It cannot stand the book of Romans. It cannot stand the book of Hebrews. It cannot stand the book of Revelation. It cannot stand the four Gospels. This heresy cannot possibly stand up under all the light of the Bible. It is a night-blooming plant and blooms in the shadows of human thought. But as soon as we turn the whole Bible loose on it, it withers and dies.

Now what it does mean? It means that there are lost souls, which the Scripture calls spirits in prison, them that are dead. And some of these in the passage are identified as being the earth's population at the time of Noah's flood. They heard the message preached and they denied or refused it, rejected it. And the result was that they perished along with their evil deeds at the coming of the flood.

And it teaches us that these all went to the place of the dead; Hades in the New Testament, Sheol in the Old, the place of the dead, and that Christ's body, when He died, lay three days in Joseph's new tomb. But that His spirit was not in His body, but separated temporarily from His body. And in that spirit, He went and preached to the spirits that were in Hades, the spirits in prison.

Do you remember the Apostles' Creed that we used to quote it around here sometimes, but we've sort of quit. We all believe in the Apostles' Creed. It says this about our Lord, that He was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born to the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. And the third day, He arose again from the dead.

Now that's the way we Protestants have it. But the old Apostles' Creed reads like this, that Jesus Christ was born to the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and descended into Hades. And the third day, He arose again from the dead.

Now that was only saying what Peter said here, and what Paul said, as we'll notice later. That when Jesus Christ's spirit was free from the crucified body, that spirit did not lie quiescent or hover over the tomb. Jesus Christ, the Eternal Son, in His spirit, had a work

to do. And so the work He had to do was to go, descend into hell, that is, descend not into the fires of hell for punishment, but descend to the place of the dead, and there preach the word to those that had died, and whose spirits were confined there.

And so, He preached the soundness of Noah's position, and He told them why judgment had come, and He justified the ways of God to man, and explained what had taken place, in order that they might know that they were being treated as intelligent beings.

Always remember, brethren, that God treats every human being as an intelligent being. You may not be as bright as Einstein, but you're morally intelligent, and God will never violate your intelligence. And He never means that you should simply shut your eyes and gulp and swallow what's ever given to you. He means that you're an intelligent, moral being, and therefore He will not violate your intelligence, nor will He treat you like a moron.

There's a certain healing evangelist who goes up and down the country, and when anybody comes, he says, they've got a demon in them, and he wants to pray for the demon to go out. He tells everybody in the congregation, now don't you open your eyes and look, for if you do, the demon will go on you. That kind of intimidation, that kind of trickery.

Why the average magician who does tricks for money on a stage wouldn't be so cheap. That if Jesus Christ is casting out devils and healing the sick, I don't dare look lest the demon will jump on me. Where do you find that in your Bible? Where is that in the New Testament? Where is that any place within the confines of the Word of God? Nowhere. That's cheap trickery. And I'd have no hesitation to look in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, I never did anything in a corner. I never did anything with people's eyes shut. I never had to do anything and hide. All religious activity should be an open book. Everything from the treasurer's receipt book up and down the scale in the church of Christ should be open to the eyes of mankind.

And there's never any place in the Bible where God treats me as if I didn't have good sense. So that even the spirits that were in prison, even those who died and are in the place of the dead, our Lord went to them in His spirit and preached to them and explained how things were, in order that justice might be done.

You take an ordinary English or American court, something like this goes on. The evidence has been heard. The jury goes out and deliberates. They come back in. They pronounce the defendant guilty. And the judge says, will the defendant please rise and face the court? The defendant rises and the judge says something to this effect. Mr. So-and-so, the evidence has been heard, and a jury of your peers have decided from the evidence that you have been guilty of such and such a crime. Before you are sentenced, is there anything you want to say?

In other words, we're about to sentence you, but we're not abrogating your intelligence. We're not treating you like a robot. You are an intelligent human being, and you're able

to judge us. And if we as a judge and jury are wrong you, you'll judge us. Therefore, we want to clear this whole matter up. Have you anything to say? Usually, they don't have.

But if there was anything that this intelligent sinner could say to the judge, the judge would give it respectful consideration. For in theory at least, American and English courts are not going to railroad a man to the electric chair nor to prison. They're going to do it according to the rules of justice, with all the gears showing and all the processes open before the eyes of mankind.

So, God says that all the wicked were swept away by a flood and hurled to the place of the dead, and they will never see the blessedness of heaven or know God. But we're not simply going to sweep them out as if they were inert bits of filth, they're human, they're intelligent, they're moral creatures. They're capable of exercising judgment on their own right.

And therefore, the everlasting Son of God went before the spirits in prison and preached to them there. Preached to them though they were living and because they were spirits, they were alive in their spirit. They had sinned in the flesh, and they were to be judged for the days they lived in the flesh. And their whole heart said, amen, to the judgment of God.

Now, my brethren, if you don't believe this, let me give you some Scripture to show why Christ descended into the place of the dead, into hell, as it says. Ephesians 4:8-10. Turn to that, if you will, for a moment. It says, wherefore, he saith, when Christ descended upon high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto man. Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all things that he might fill, all things.

We are told here that when Jesus Christ's body lay in the grave, His spirit went to those captives in the place of the dead and preached release to them. And when He arose, He took with Him all the redeemed spirits of ransomed men that had been shut in the place of the dead, Hades.

You remember, Jacob said, I will go down unto Sheol, Hades, down unto Sheol, mourning for my son. And when Samuel the dead man came back from the dead, he came up out of the earth. But after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and after Christ had taken the redeemed ones with Him to heaven, to the place of Paradise, Paul said, I was caught up into Paradise, to the third heaven. It was no longer down, but up.

The Lord Himself, the Lord of life and glory, had taken His ransomed ones out of the place of the dead. But that place of the dead contained not only the redeemed ones, but it contained also those that were not redeemed, separated, however, by a gulf, a great gulf that was fixed. Lazarus and the rich man explain that. When the rich man died, he went to the place of the dead. And when Lazarus died, he went to the place of the dead, this time Abraham's bosom, with a great gulf fixed between.

So, when our Lord descended after His death, He descended into Hades. He took all in Abraham's bosom with Him up to heaven and left the rest there. But in doing it, He explained it and preached in His spirit to all those that were in the place of the dead.

Now, if that isn't enough, let me give you Philippians 2:9 & 11. Wherefore, God also hath highly exalted Jesus, and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth. And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So that not only those in heaven and those on earth, but those in hell are forced to confess with their tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord. And this they do to the glory of God the Father.

So, you see, my brethren, that passage that Peter gives us here doesn't teach universalism. It teaches only that Jesus Christ, our Lord, while His body lay in the grave, went in the spirit to Sheol, the place of the dead. There He preached deliverance to the ransomed, and judgment to the lost, took His ransomed ones with Him and left the lost for the judgment of the Great Day.

But everyone, those under the earth and those on the earth, and all creatures everywhere, admit that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This Jesus Christ, our Lord, is not going to rule over any that do not willingly submit to His rule. He will not enforce His rule over one human being or one moral creature.

But he will force from the unwilling tongues of even lost ones the fact that He's right. True and righteous are thy judgments, O Lord, will be the only text in hell. The only text in hell, and I'm not sure it won't be cut in tablatures of that terrible place. True and righteous are thy judgments, O Lord.

In order that that might be known through all the three worlds above and on the earth and beneath, there had to be a declaration of the whole just plan of God to those that are dead as well as those that live. But there is not one sentence, not one phrase, not one word, not one letter in the Bible that teaches that Jesus ever preached the gospel to the dead and said, come unto me. He said, Come unto me to the living. But he never preached a gospel of redemption and gave an invitation and said, Come.

It is appointed unto men once to die and after that, the judgement. The preaching to the dead was done in order that the dead, as well as the living, the lost as well as the saved, might know how true and just and righteous our God is, and how impeccable is His character, how holy are His ways, and that He doeth all things well.

Now, I admit that this is not the kind of a message to send you out with moist eyes, but you need to hear this, and we needed to know this, so the next time someone comes pushing your doorbell with a phonograph record to play to you, you will be able to smile and say, I know what the Bible teaches. Thank you. Goodbye. Quietly close, never slam it. Don't slam it. That's not nice. Christians never slam doors. But close it rather crisply, I would suggest, because their false teachers are growing, and their numbers are growing by leaps and bounds.

Last month we had in Chicago our 57th annual missionary council. We had about 1100 of us. Last summer when I was preaching at Keswick, out in the east, we were held up 45 minutes getting through Lincoln Tunnel. You know why? The traffic was so heavy on the road, and you know why it was so heavy on the road? Jehovah's Witnesses were

gathering at Yankee Stadium. 100,000 strong! After 57 years of missionary enterprise, we get 1100. They had 100,000 present.

So you need to know these things even if they don't bless you at the time, so you will have a shield of truth to raise against the fiery darts of error.

Father, bless Thy Word. We pray Thee that Thou wilt help us to see how wondrous are Thy judgments and Thy ways past finding out, to receive with bowed heads and reverent minds the hard, obscure things as well as the easy, plain things.

We thank Thee, Lord, that the easy, plain things outnumber the others perhaps a thousand to one. Bless Thou the word given this morning, for Jesus' sake. Amen.