



TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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READER QUESTIONS (11)

SELECTED TEXTS

ONCE AGAIN WE TURN TO QUESTIONS OUR READERS have on certain texts of Scripture or specific issues. In this installment of a series that began way back in January of 2008, we address six questions concerning: the will of the flesh (Jn. 1:13); the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:16); our Lord's words, "This Is My Body"; the sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15); training up a child (Prov. 22:6); and the falling away in the last days (2 Thes. 2:3).

The Will of the Flesh

Question: My question is on John 1:13. I think I know what "not of blood" and "nor of the will of man" mean, but what about "nor of the will of the flesh"? (CD)

Answer: John 1:12 is an often quoted verse, and rightly so, of course: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power [i.e., right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Many Gospel preachers quote this verse, but they stop without quoting the next one, which emphasizes that God alone has done *all* of the salvation work apart from *anything* from man: **Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.** There is a stunning three-fold emphasis here.

First, being born again does not come by **blood**. The Greek here (*haima*) is actually plural (*haimatōn*). While we would not refer to natural birth with such an idiom, this was typical in Jewish thought. The Jews prided themselves on being the descendants of Abraham (Matt. 3:9), so John is clearly saying that salvation does not come from "bloodlines," that is, illustrious lines of ancestry or parental heritage. You cannot inherit salvation because your parents were Christians, or because you come from a long line of Christians," or because you live in a "Christian nation" (which you don't).

Second, being born again does not come by **the will of the flesh**. This phrase has caused some puzzlement and debate, but the most natural meaning seems to lie in the word **flesh**, that is, all that makes us human. In other words, *outwardly* speaking, going to church won't do it, practicing all sorts of external things, such as rites and rituals, won't do it, and doing good works won't do it. *Inwardly* speaking, then, we can't achieve it by thinking (intellect), feeling (emotion), or choosing (will) the right thing. In short, our will can accomplish

absolutely nothing.

Third, being born again does not come by **the will of man**. Not only is it not the result of *our* effort, but neither is it the result of *anyone else's* effort. No **man**—neither priest, bishop, archbishop, or anyone else, nor any ritual or sacrament they perform—can save us. Salvation is **of God** alone. He has done it *all* because **man** can do *nothing*.

The New Jerusalem

Question: Do you have any articles on Revelation 21:16? (JK)

Answer: I have not written a full article on this verse, but let us take at least a summary look here: **And the city lieth foursquare, and the length is as large as the breadth: and he measured the city with the reed, twelve thousand furlongs. The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.** This verse refers to the New Jerusalem. As Henry Halley well says: "The Bible begins with a garden and ends with a city,"¹ indeed, The Capitol City of Heaven. To get the full impact, let us examine this in the context.

First, we see the *symbolism* of the New Jerusalem (vv. 11–14). Human imagination could never envision a more magnificent symbol of the eternal dwelling place of God's redeemed people. While the writer of Hebrews foresaw such a city (11:10, 16; 13:14;), its full reality had yet to be described. There God's people, both OT saints (11:40), NT Church saints (the Bride, 12:23; Rev. 19:7; 21:2), and a myriad of angels (Heb. 12:23) will see the blazing, radiant glory of God (21:11) and our Savior in His full glory (v. 22). The fact that verse 1 says the city will come down from Heaven but does *not* say it lands on the Earth might very well indicate that it will hover above the Earth. What a symbol of eternal glory!

Second, we see the *size* of the New Jerusalem (vv. 15–17), which is specified in the text in question and is utterly staggering. The Greek behind **furlongs** (*stadion*) referred specifically to the ancient footrace of that name. It was the first and most important competition of the ancient Olympiad. That importance is reflected in the fact that each four-year Olympiad was given the name of the Stadion victor (the first in 776 BC was Coroebus of Elis, a Greek cook, baker, and athlete). This ongoing list of names from 776 BC to AD 225 en-

abled many Greek authors to date historic events accurately. The Greek *stadion* became the Latin *stadium* and, of course, our English word. The Greek was also a unit of measure. The original *stadion* track in Olympia measured approximately 210 yards (630 feet).

So, with that distance in mind, the text tells us that the walls of the New Jerusalem are about 1386 miles in each direction. Putting that into perspective, that is about the distance from San Francisco to central Kansas and from Mexico to Canada. That is truly staggering, even more so when we calculate this as 1.9 million square miles. Even more startling is that the language here indicates this is a *cube*. While some commentators have speculated that this is actually a pyramid shape, that simply cannot be. As Henry Morris well recounts, in fact, the pyramid shape “(whether as in Egypt, Mexico, or the stepped-towers of practically all ancient nations), seems always to have been associated with paganism, with the pyramid’s apex being dedicated to the worship of the sun, or of the host of heaven. The first such structure was the Tower of Babel, and the Bible always later condemns worship carried on in high places (Lev. 26:30) whether these were simply natural high hills or artificially constructed hills in the form of a pyramid or ziggurat. The cube . . . was the shape specified by God for the holy place . . . in Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 6:20), where God was to ‘dwell’ between the cherubim. Both the language and the symbology thus favor the cubical, rather than the pyramidal, shape.”² So, this city will also be 1386 miles high. The International Space Station orbits at 254 miles, but this wall will be almost five and a half times that height, which then means that the total of square miles will be 2.66 billion, in contrast to the entire surface of the earth that is only 196.9 million.

Putting that into perspective again, Los Angeles is 503 square miles and has a population of four million, and there’s seven billion on the entire planet (and that is on just land masses), but how many will the New Jerusalem accommodate? Morris is again very helpful here. It can be estimated that since the time of Creation to the present, the population has been about 40 billion. Assuming two other factors—another 40 billion during the Millennium and another 20 billion of those who died before or soon after birth—it is reasonable that 100 billion people will constitute the human race (past, present, and future).

Morris adds one other thought that blesses our hearts: “It should also be remembered that the new bodies of the resurrected saints will be like those of angels, no longer limited by gravitational or electromagnetic forces as at present. Thus it will be as easy for the inhabitants to travel vertically as horizontally, in the new Jerusalem. Consequently, the ‘streets’ of the city (v. 21) may well include vertical passageways as well as horizontal avenues, and the ‘blocks’ could be real cubical blocks, instead of square areas between streets as in a present-day earthly city.”³ Adapting Morris’ discussion a bit, while we can only make a guess here, of course, let us assume now that 20 percent of that total will be true born again believers (that number could very well be *less*, however, since Matt. 7:13–14 clearly indicates that few go through the narrow gate to eternal life). Using that assumption, the New Jerusalem could be the eternal home of 20 billion believers. Now assume that 25 percent of the city is used for the dwellings of

the residents (the “abode, manor, manse, or mansion” of Jn. 14:2; Greek, *monē*), with the rest assigned to the other features of a city (streets, buildings, etc.). That means that each person’s “cube” would be a little over one-third of a mile in each direction.

Third, we see the *splendor* of the New Jerusalem (vv. 18–21). In addition to what we have already seen, the first description that jumps off the page is the whole city will be “pure gold” that looks like transparent glass (vv. 18, 21). This is in direct contrast to ancient Babylon, which was known as “the golden city” (Is. 14:4) and a wonder of the ancient world, but here is the *real* City of God, not Satan’s counterfeit. Each gate will be a 1,400 mile high pearl, and the 12 foundations will be comprised of a precious stone, which are similar to the names of the 12 stones in the breastplate of the High Priest (Ex. 28:15–30; 39:10–13). Some have changed in name so we cannot be sure, but each one is a spectacular gem of dazzling color and blazing brilliance. These foundations are not sections but rather layers, one upon the other encircling the city. As we gaze upon all this, it will reflect a prism effect of symmetrical beauty that we will only then be able to comprehend.

I think it is critically important to add one more consideration. Is all this to be taken literally? After all, isn’t this a little fantastic to believe? Some, indeed, do not think it should be taken literally. Albert Barnes writes: “Of course, this cannot be understood literally; and the very idea of a literal fulfillment of this shows the absurdity of that method of interpretation.” Adam Clarke likewise submits: “It is hard to say how this should be understood. It cannot mean the height of the buildings, nor of the walls, for neither houses nor walls could be twelve thousand furlongs in height.” A modern commentator also insists: “None of these descriptions is literal; if it is difficult to breathe atop the world’s highest mountain (about five miles high), a city fifteen hundred miles high would not be very practical (at least under current laws of physics!).”⁴

The latter writer, however, answers his own (and others’s) skepticism: “at least under current laws of physics.” *That* is precisely the point. Denying this as being literal comes from earthly thinking. Are we to think that the God who created the gravitational and electromagnetic forces mentioned earlier (as well as the breathable atmosphere) is therefore bound by them and limited to what He can build? I have believed for many years that the problem is not that Revelation is hard to *understand*, rather it’s just hard to *believe*. Many people, even Christians, simply cannot (or will not) believe that God is going to do exactly what He says He is going to do, so they have to “make sense of it” by their own interpretations. If Revelation does not mean what it says (and I am convinced that it is future), then it can mean anything we choose. Abandoning the normal use of language in favor of groundless speculation creates nothing but doubt and frustration.

This Is My Body

Question: How can I answer a Roman Catholic when they insist that when Jesus said, “This is My body” and, “This is my blood” (Lk. 22:19–20) that He was speaking literally? (SB)

Answer: We have addressed the Lord’s Supper in two previous issues of TOTT,⁵ both of which are on our website. In Issue 75, we specifically addressed the four views concerning

the significance of the Supper. As noted there, it was Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) who held the biblical view, that the Supper is a memorial, as the meaning of **remembrance** (*anamnēsis*) clearly signifies. Adding to what was written there, he rightly viewed the **is** in our Lord's statement, **this is my body**, as meaning "signifies" or "represents." Other examples of this metaphorical use of the Greek *eimi* (the simple verb meaning "to be") are numerous: "ye are the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:13–14); "he is my brother and my sister and my mother" (12:50); "the seed is the Word of God" (13:37–39); "the life was the light of men" (Jn. 1:4; emphasis added in all); and many others, including His numerous "I Am" statements (Jn. 6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 9, 11, 14).

To illustrate quite simply, if I look at a map of Florida, point at the city of Hollywood, and say, "This is Hollywood," I obviously and unambiguously mean, "This *represents* Hollywood," not that the literal city was contained in that little dot on the page. It would even spark wonderful memories for me because that is where my wife and I spent our honeymoon in April 1974. It is also significant that, as A. A. Hodge (son of Charles) recounts, Zwingli's

view at first prevailed among the Reformed churches and was embodied in Zwingli's *Fidei Ratio* [i.e., *The Ground of Faith*] sent to the Diet of Augsburg [in] 1530; the *Confessio Tetrpolitana* [i.e., *Confession of Four Cities*: Strasbourg, Konstanz, Memmingen, and Lindau] by Martin Bucer [in] 1530; the *First Basle Confession* by Oswald Myconius [in] 1532; and the *First Helvetic Confession* by [Heinrich] Bullinger, Myconius, etc. [in] 1536.⁶

When one examines the biblical text, and *only* the biblical text without any mysticism, it is the Memorial View that must be embraced. (Lord willing, a new book on this subject is coming latter this year, "In Remembrance of Me": *The Doctrine and Duty of the Lord's Supper*.)

The Sacrifice of Praise

Question: What does "a sacrifice of praise" mean in Hebrews 13:15? (DL)

Answer: What a wonderful statement! The key word in Hebrews is "better," as it repeatedly emphasizes Christ as being better. He was better than the angels (1:4), He is a better hope (7:19), the better Mediator of a better covenant and better promises (8:6), Christians have a better country awaiting us because of Him, that is, heaven (11:16), and we also await a better resurrection (11:35) in Him. Well, here we have another example: **By [Christ] therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.**

The sacrificial system, of course, was at the center of Judaism, so it was only natural that newly converted Jews would wonder if there was any kind of required sacrifice in this New Covenant of Christ. While they certainly knew that Christ was the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (10:1–18), after centuries in that former system they could not help but wonder if there were still some other sacrifices or offerings God required.

For example, while burnt offerings (Lev. 1:3–17; cf. 6:8–13), sin offerings (4:1–5:13; cf. 6:24–30), and trespass offer-

ings (5:15–7:7; cf. 7:1–10) were all about sin and were designed to remove transgression, this was not the case with what was called the "peace offering" (Lev. 3:1–17). "It first expressed not only the peace the worshipper had with God, but, second, that this peace actually resulted in fellowship with God. This fellowship is graphically indicated by the fact that this was the only sacrifice in which the worshipper shared, along with the priest, in a communal meal. This is further underscored by two other unique features: This was the only sacrifice for which a female animal was allowed and also the only sacrifice that did not have to be unblemished. Since the offering was primarily for food for the priest and offerer, such restrictions were unnecessary."⁷ So, perhaps they thought that these, or something similar, was still required of Christians.

Well, something *is* required, but it is again far better, for we now "worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn. 4:24), not in ritual or ceremony. Our sacrifice now is continual praise and thanksgiving. The phrase **fruit of the lips**, in fact, is a Hebraism, meaning what the lips produce—*words*. Of special significance is the phrase **giving thanks**. This is Greek *homologeō*, a compound comprised of *homo* (same) and *logos* (word), so literally, to say the same words. It appears in 1 John 1:9 for what it means to "confess" our sin, to say the same thing about it that God does. Here, then, it means to say the same words about God that He says of Himself. That is, indeed, thanksgiving and praise.

So, what a contrast we see here! No longer must we offer lambs, fruit, or grain in endless sacrifices, rather we offer the continual praising of the lips (Pss. 7:17; 34:1; 43:5; 108:3; 1 Thes. 5:18; Rev. 5:9–14; 19:1–6; etc.). As has been quoted often, Puritan William Gurnall spoke of "the double action of the lungs"—the air sucked in by prayer and breathed forth again in praise.

Train Up a Child

Question: Does Proverbs 22:6 teach that if you train up a child rightly, he or she will never depart from that? It seems to me, however, that some do stray. (LS)

Answer: This has indeed been a "tough text" for many: **Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it.**

Having had a little struggle myself with this verse, I am convinced that the key word here is **train** and that the rest of the verse flows from that. The Hebrew is *chānak*, which carries the basic meaning "to dedicate." In its other occurrences, in fact, it is used to refer to the dedication of a house (Deut. 20:5), a temple (1 Kings 8:63), a wall (Neh. 12:27), an altar (Num. 7:10), or an image (Dan. 3:2). Some Hebrew authorities think it best to understand this word as "inaugurate" or even "initiate." So, we are to dedicate, inaugurate, initiate, start our children on a particular **way** (*derek*), that is, a path or journey, and thereby train them according to it.

Trouble arises, however, when we get to the phrase, **he should go**. To which **way** is this referring? The most popular way to understand this is to train the child according to the way of God's law. Now, while that is obviously important, that does not seem to reflect the point of the Hebrew idiom. Further, this point would really not need to be emphasized here

because such training is already understood. After all, *wisdom* is the theme of the entire book of Proverbs, so training our children according to wisdom is a given.

So, the point here goes further than that. This phrase is a single word in the Hebrew, and is a little odd at that. It is *peh*, which occurs some 500 times and means “mouth” in most contexts. So, the idea in the idiom here is, “Initiate a child in the way of his own mouth.” In other words, train, teach, and tutor him the best way that fits his own personality, character, traits, and talents, while keeping in check his own self-will. As Albert Barnes puts it: “The proverb enjoins the closest possible study of each child’s temperament and the adaptation of ‘his way of life’ to that.” Another is even better:

The instruction of youth, the education of youth, ought to be conformed to the nature of youth; the matter of instruction, the manner of instruction, ought to regulate itself according to the stage of life, and its peculiarities; the method ought to be arranged according to the degree of development which the mental and bodily life of the youth has arrived at.⁸

So, as we teach our children the Truth, the wisdom of God’s Word, and the way they should live, we conform that instruction to each unique child, for each learns differently.

What, then, of the rest of the verse: **and when he is old, he will not depart from it?** The teaching that we impart will be so much imbedded and imprinted on those children that they will never forget and most likely not **depart** (*cuw*, turn away; e.g., Deut. 11:16; 1 Sam. 12:20) from it. Will this always be the case? No, for this is a *proverb* that is *wise*, not a *promise* that is *absolute* and serves as a warning not to allow children to train themselves.

The Falling Away in the Last Days

Question: I have two questions about 2 Thessalonians 2:3: Is this “a” or “the” falling away, as translations differ, and therefore, what exactly does all this mean? (DH)

Answer: In the wake of the events of 2020, it is indeed appropriate that eschatology and the last days are on believer’s minds. While we must be very careful not to get carried away by wild speculation in considering “the signs of the times,” it is still unwise to ignore what is going on in our world. Passages such as 2 Timothy 3 are simply too real to shrug off.

Likewise, while the primary focus of both Paul’s letters to the Thessalonians is the Church, there is, of course, a strong eschatological emphasis. The context around this verse concerns prophecies about the last days before Christ’s return. The specific prophecy here is: **Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition.** The words **falling away** translate the Greek *apostasia* (English apostasy), which refers to a revolt, a state of rebellion. In secular Greek, for example, Plutarch used it of political revolt. The Septuagint uses it in Joshua 22:22 for rebellion against the Lord.

A key verse here is 1 Timothy 4:1: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from

[*apostasia*] the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.” This vividly describes the last days before Christ’s return. Those days will be (and are!) inundated with apostates, those who have revolted against and departed from Christian Truth. In other words, it is *professed* Christianity but actually a denial of it. There has always been the plague of false teaching and teachers. That is why discernment is so crucial. The main thrust of Peter’s second epistle is a warning against false teachers who will infiltrate the church. That is best summarized in 2:1: “There shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.”

But the apostasy described here in our text is not referring to such general apostasy but to something more. Why? Because the Greek also includes the definite article, that is, “*the* apostasy,” not “*an* apostasy” (or “*a* falling away”). This is critical to the correct understanding of the last days. While some well-meaning, godly interpreters insist that the world is getting better, this is unambiguously telling us that while there has always been apostasy, which is ever growing worse, it has been generally dispersed throughout Christendom. But what is ultimately coming is *the specific apostasy* that will come just prior to Christ’s return. What is that? It will be a complete, wholesale abandonment and rejection of the Christian Faith. We then read the word **and**, which obviously means something else is going to happen either concurrently or quickly thereafter—the **son of perdition**, the Antichrist will be revealed and will ultimately set himself up as God (v. 4).

My Dear Christian Friend, we are seeing every day that this event is growing closer. We see the *diluting* of the Gospel, the *denial* of core doctrines, and the *disregard* for anything Scripture says. We see all this not only in liberal Christendom but even within professing Evangelicalism. Apostasy is here, it is growing, and it will culminate in the Antichrist. May we each keep our course set on the Truth.

Dr. J. D. Watson

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NOTES

¹ *Halley’s Bible Handbook* (Zondervan, 1927, 1965), 737.

² *The Revelation Record* (Tyndale, 1983), 450.

³ *Ibid*, 451.

⁴ Craig Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*.

⁵ Issue 2 (Sept. 2005), “How Often Should the Lord’s Supper Be Observed?” and Issue 75 (Jan./Feb. 2012) “The Lord’s Supper: Memorial or More?”

⁶ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 640.

⁷ From the author’s, *A Hebrew Word for the Day* (AMG Publishers), 112.

⁸ Karl Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Keil and Delitzsch Old Testament Commentary* (1866, public domain).

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