



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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A MINISTRY OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH

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### *Reader Questions (5)*

#### Selected Scriptures

**O**NCE AGAIN WE TURN TO QUESTIONS FROM you, our readers. Such questions are always a joy to receive, and we pray that our answers will be a blessing. Also included later in this issue is a book review of Dr. Steven J. Lawson's wonderful book, *Foundations of Grace*.

#### *A Bible "Contradiction"*

**Q:** The Bible appears to contradict itself in the case of Jehoiachin. Second Kings 24:8 states that he was **eighteen** years old when he began to reign while 2 Chronicles 36:9 says he was **eight** years old. How can this be reconciled? (BD)

**A:** **Eight** is *shemōneh*. **Eighteen** is *shemōneh* (8) *āsār* (10), the latter being used in combination with other numerals from eleven to nineteen. Most commentators chalk this "contradiction" up to "scribal error." That bothers me, however, because it's two separate words and would be a huge error on the part of a copyist. It's one thing to copy one or two letters incorrectly, but to insert an entire word and thereby drastically alter the meaning is a pretty big stretch. Textually, in fact, the majority of Hebrew manuscripts actually read **eight** in 2 Chronicles 36:9. It's also odd that such commentators shrug off the clear implication that such a "contradiction" damages the doctrine of inspiration.

A couple of explanations have been offered, the most likely being that it was at eight years of age that his father designated him as the next king, but he did not assume that role until he was eighteen. A variation of-

ferred in a note in the Geneva Bible of the Reformation was that "he began his reign at eight years old, and reigned ten years when his father was alive, and after his father's death, which was in his 18th year, he reigned alone three months and ten days." Another variation is that "at the age of eight his father took him into partnership in the government. He began to reign alone at eighteen" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown). In any case, is this not better than casting doubt upon the text, which seems to be an ever popular practice?

#### *The Persian Queen in Nehemiah's Day*

**Q:** In its lessons on the book of Nehemiah, our home school curriculum refers to the Persian queen in Nehemiah as probably being Esther. This didn't seem right to me. Would you have any insight here? (HH)

**A:** This question arises because of Nehemiah 2:6: "And the king said unto me [Nehemiah], (the queen also sitting by him,) For how long shall thy journey be? and when wilt thou return? So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time." There are some who believe that the queen mentioned here was Esther, but that just doesn't fit, as you indicate. She was the queen of the previous king, Xerxes (Ahasuerus; ca. 486–464 BC). It is now 446 BC and Artaxerxes (Longimanus, Esther's step-son) is on the throne. What seems likely, therefore, is that Esther (who might actually have still been alive) influenced her step-son, and his queen, to show some favor to the Jews. Extra biblical historical sources, in fact, tell us that this queen's name was Damaspia.

## *The Folded Napkin in Jesus' Tomb*

**Q:** I recently received an e-mail forward containing the following explanation for the “folded napkin” in Jesus’ tomb:

The Gospel of John (20:7) tells us that the napkin, which was placed over the face of Jesus, was not just thrown aside like the grave clothes. The Bible takes an entire verse to tell us that the napkin was neatly folded, and was placed at the head of that stony coffin. Early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, “They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and I don’t know where they have put him!” Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb to see. The other disciple outran Peter and got there first. He stopped and looked in and saw the linen cloth lying there, but he didn’t go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying to the side.

Is it really significant? In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, you need to understand a little bit about Hebrew tradition of that day. The folded napkin had to do with the Master and Servant, and every Jewish boy knew this tradition. When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished. Now if the master were done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, “I’m finished.” But if the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because the folded napkin meant, “I’m coming back.”

Do you have any sources to verify or deny this? (JB)

**Q:** I included all the above to provide a vivid example of what is so typical of the misinformation on the Internet and another proof of how critical discernment is in our day. It is sad, indeed, that several online sermons include a yarn that is found *only* on the Internet, not in historical record. This tale, in fact, if I may be so blunt, is patently ridiculous. Commentator William Hendrickson puts it perfectly when he calls such things “exegeti-

cal (?) embellishments” (the question mark indicating that this is not true exegesis at all). The first such embellishment, in fact, is in the third line. Neither our text nor Luke 24:12 says the grave cloths were “just thrown aside.” Most notable, however, is the word “napkin,” which is the Greek *sudarion*, a handkerchief or sweat band or cloth, *not* a dinner napkin; such an idea comes from a western application of an Elizabethan English term and immediately proves this story to be fiction, pretty good fiction we admit, but fiction nonetheless.

A study of historical sources, in fact, reveals not a shred of evidence for a supposed Jewish custom of “the folded napkin.” Further, I could not find a single orthodox Jewish authority who has ever even heard of such a custom. How odd that “every Jewish boy knew this tradition” but one can’t find one today who does. The only places it can be found are on the Internet and seems to have first popped up in 2007.

The simple explanation of the text, which virtually all commentators agree, is that this little detail demonstrates that the Lord’s departure was orderly and unhurried. The words **wrapped together** translate the Greek *entulissō*, a verb meaning “to roll up in, wrap in, to fold or wrap together.” The clothes were, therefore, carefully rolled up or folded. If someone had stolen the body, which God knew would be the Jewish leaders’ preposterous explanation for the missing body, the cloth would not have been so carefully handled. As another expositor notes, “Doubtless the two attendant angels (Jn. 20:12) did this service for the Rising One, the one disposing of the linen clothes, the other of the napkin” (Bengel). These facts, Hendrickson goes on to add, “are wonderful enough without exegetical embellishments.”

A bonus benefit of this historical fact is that it also totally discredits the modern myth (if not deliberate hoax) of the so-called “Shroud of Turin.” Have you seen the pictures? They show the imprint of the crucified victim from head to toe in a single piece of cloth. But that is impossible; there was a separate piece of cloth around the head. “The Shroud” is just one more of thousands of instances of fallen man’s predilection for “sacred relics” (see TOTT #63, “The Pestilence of Idolatry”).

## *God “Sent the Hornet”*

**Q:** What does it mean that God “sent the hornet” before Israel (Josh. 24:12)? (WD)

**A:** This description, which also appears in Exodus 23:28 and Deuteronomy 7:20, is a striking picture of God Himself fighting to help Israel (23:3, 5, 10, 18). Using some overwhelming force, He caused the enemy to flee. The **hornet** has been interpreted several ways: (1) literal hornets, (2) a symbol of Pharaoh, (3) a sense of panic or despair caused by God, (4) some kind of

plague, such as leprosy, or (5) an angel of the Lord (cf. Ex. 23:27, 28; Deut. 7:20). Whichever it was, the point is that God did it. The two kings are probably Adoni-Zedek (10:1) and Jabin (11:1), who led the southern and northern coalitions.

That said, I see no reason not to take this to refer to literal hornets. Classic Commentator Adam Clark writes of Exodus 23:28:

The hornet, in natural history, belongs to the species crabro, of the genus vespa or wasp; it is a most voracious insect, and is exceedingly strong for its size, which is generally an inch in length, though I have seen some an inch and a half long, and so strong that, having caught one in a small pair of forceps, it repeatedly escaped by using violent contortions, so that at last I was obliged to abandon all hopes of securing it alive...How distressing and destructive a multitude of these might be, any person may conjecture; even the bees of one hive would be sufficient to sting a thousand men to madness, but how much worse must wasps and hornets be! No armor, no weapons, could avail against these. A few thousands of them would be quite sufficient to throw the best disciplined army into confusion and rout. [Here in] Josh. 24:12, we find that two kings of the Amorites were actually driven out of the land by these hornets, so that the Israelites were not obliged

to use either sword or bow in the conquest.

The always historically thorough John Gill also offers some compelling data:

[It is not] any strange or unheard of thing for people to be drove out of their countries by small animals, as mice, flies, bees, &c. and particularly Aelianus relates, that the Phaselites were drove out of their country by wasps: and it has shown that those people were of a Phoenician original, and inhabited the mountains of Solymi; and that this happened to them about the times of Joshua, and so may probably be the very Canaanites here mentioned.

While the Bible does, of course, use figurative language, it always makes it clear that the language *is* figurative, either in the immediate context or greater context of Scripture. When there is ambiguity, therefore, the wisest course is to take the language literally and historically. There is already enough allegory, spiritualizing, and mysticism in the church today. Literal (or plain) interpretation is the only consistent and wise method.

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## Book Review: *Foundations of Grace*

By: Steven J. Lawson

While some teachers insist that the Doctrines of Grace are “a twisting of Scripture” or are a teaching that is simply “based upon a few isolated proof texts,” there is in reality nothing that permeates the Bible more than these doctrines, doctrines that proclaim God’s sovereign grace. From Genesis to Revelation, in literally hundreds of verses, these doctrines call, capture, and command our attention.

That is the theme of Dr. Steve Lawson’s *Foundations of Grace*. I mentioned this book in our top ten list back in February (TOTT #67), but I wanted to expand that review. I recently recommended this book to a friend and colleague who had not yet heard of it. The next time we talked his first comment was that next to the Bible this was his favorite book. There is good reason for that, and I think this will be true of many readers. This book is nothing less than a modern classic.

“The teaching of sovereign grace,” Lawson writes, “literally stretches from cover to cover in the Bible” (p. 36). Beginning with Moses, moving on to the historical writers and prophets, and then marching on to the Apos-

ttles, early Church Fathers and their descendents throughout Church History, and finally up to modern defenders of the faith, the doctrines of sovereign grace are shown to be biblical and historical beyond the slightest shadow of a doubt.

Of Erasmus, Luther declared: “Your God is too man-like” (cited in Sinclair Ferguson, “The Fear of the Lord: Seeing God As He Is,” *Discipleship Journal* 52 [1989], p. 42). One of the saddest developments that has again overtaken Christianity is the rejection of the historical Doctrines of Grace in favor of a man-centered “theology.” But there are no doctrines that are more life-changing, character-transforming, evangelism-driving, and Christ-exalting than are these. I would dare predict that anyone who currently rejects these doctrines (either in total or just “certain points”), if they would just quietly and prayerfully read Lawson’s book, they would reconsider and very possibly be transformed forever. The Doctrines of Grace are not part of a system *imposed* upon the Bible, rather truth that is *infused* within it, and Lawson’s masterpiece repeatedly demonstrates this with clarity,

comprehensiveness, and conviction—while “masterpiece” is perhaps an overused label nowadays, I have no hesitation whatsoever using it here.

A few chapter titles well illustrate this wondrous subject. Old Testament chapters include: “Where the Long Line Begins” (Gen.); “Sovereign Grace in the Wilderness” (Exod.); “Spokesman of Sovereign Grace” (Isa.); and “Heralds of Divine Regeneration” (Jer., Ezek., Dan.).

The New Testament chapters begin with one that might offend some: “Christ, the Calvinist” (Matt., Mk, Lk.), which graphically and accurately presents how “our Lord boldly proclaimed the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men wherever He went” (p. 242). As Lawson reminds us for history’s sake, quoting James Montgomery Boice, “The doctrines known as Calvinism are not something that emerged late in church history, but rather are that which takes its origins in the teaching of Jesus.” Other chapters then include: “The Mount Everest of Theology” (Jn.); “By His Grace and for His Glory” (Rom.); “Preacher of the Doctrines of Grace (1 & 2 Cor. and Gal.); “Before the Foundation of the World” (Eph.—2 Thess.); “Evangelism and Divine Sovereignty” (Acts and Heb.); and “Sovereign Regeneration” (the epistles of James John, and Jude).

As a book reviewer, the publisher (Reformation Trust) sent me a PDF copy for this review, a very unique approach. Upon final approval of my review, they will send me a hardcopy as “compensation.” My review doesn’t have to be “positive,” only “serious, substantive, and fair.” My comments, therefore, are not motivated by “compensation,” rather by true excellence. Believe me, if I didn’t like it, I would tell you so.

This volume is actually the first of five in Lawson’s series, “A Long Line of Godly Men.” Again, this first one (*Foundations of Grace*) covers 1400 BC through

AD 100, tracing the doctrines of grace throughout every book of the Bible. Volume 2 (*Pillars of Grace*) will cover the 2nd- through 16th-centuries (Irenaeus, Jerome, Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin). Volume 3 (*Forces of Grace*) will cover the 16th- and 17th-centuries (Knox and the Puritans). Volume 4 (*Progress of Grace*) will cover the 17th- through 19th-centuries (Edwards, Warfield, Hodge, Princeton Seminary, and Shedd). Volume 5 (*Triumph of Grace*) will cover the 19th-century through the present (Spurgeon, Ryle, M’Cheyne, Kuyper, Pink, Lloyd-Jones, and MacArthur). We eagerly await each one.

In a day when doctrine is not only on the *decline*, but on the *defensive*, having to prove itself to be “relevant,” it is books like this one that underscore the *need* for truth and the *necessity* of its proclamation. There are few books that I can recommend as highly as this one. Read it, my dear Christian Friend, and be blessed.

**About the Author:** Dr. Steven J. Lawson is the senior pastor of Christ Fellowship Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, having served as a pastor in Arkansas and Alabama for twenty-five years. He is a graduate of Texas Tech University (B.B.A.), Dallas Theological Seminary (Th.M.), and Reformed Theological Seminary (D.Min.). In addition to many articles in scholarly journals, he is the author of numerous other books, including: *The Expository Genius of John Calvin* and *Famine in the Land: A Passionate Call to Expository Preaching*. In addition, Dr. Lawson’s pulpit ministry takes him around the world, most recently to Russia, Ukraine, Wales, England, Ireland, Germany, as well as many conferences in the United States, including, The Shepherd’s Conference at Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California.

## The Greatness of Grace

“Grace” is more than mercy and love, it superadds to them. It denotes, not simply love, but the love of a sovereign, transcendly superior, one that may do what he will, that may wholly choose whether he will love or no. There may be love between equals, and an inferior may love a superior; but love in a superior, and so superior as he may do what he will, in such a one love is called grace: and therefore grace is attributed to princes, they are said to be gracious to their subjects, whereas subjects cannot be gracious to princes. Now God, who is an infinite Sovereign, who might have chosen whether ever He would love us or no, for Him to love us, this is grace. —Thomas Goodwin

Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving. It is a self-existent principle inherent in the divine nature and appears to us as a self-caused propensity to pity the wretched, spare the guilty, welcome the outcast, and bring into favor those who were before under just disapprobation. Its use to us sinful men is to save us and make us sit together in heavenly places to demonstrate to the ages the exceeding riches of God’s kindness to us in Christ Jesus. —A.W. Tozer

The friends of free-will are the enemies of free-grace. —John Trapp