

## TOUGH QUESTIONS *...from the Old Testament*

### Equipped to Answer

Not long ago I had a discussion about spirituality with the owner of a car repair shop. He shared with me that, though previously a believer, he had been on a journey towards skepticism. After our discussion, he gave me a document that described the process of questioning that he was going through. Here are a few excerpts from what he wrote:

Although I've been a Christian for the last 33 years, I've become increasingly skeptical over the last several years. Sometime around the end of this last year I tipped over the edge and would no longer be able to say I believe in a Biblical worldview – that is, that the Bible accurately describes the landscape of reality and our place in it.

In recent years I have become less confident of the Bible's inerrancy. There are things that trouble me, both from the scripture and from what I see in the world around me that arouse my skepticism.

Having said that, it's not as if I see a satisfying alternative place to stand. If something other than the biblical view is "what's true," it seems impossible to me that we could know it (and know that we know it) and embrace it with anything approaching the certainty that we advocate based on the authority of the Bible. Again, it isn't a very satisfying philosophical place to be in at the moment, but I don't see any honest way out...I guess I've stepped into agnosticism.

It may be that this individual's doubts and questions are a reflection of your own. Or maybe you've run across some troubling passages in your journey of Bible reading this year that leave you questioning God and the authority of Scripture. Or maybe you don't have many questions of your own, but you've been confronted by the questions of others, and you don't really know how to respond.

Today, we're beginning a five-week series that I've entitled *Tough Questions from the Old Testament*. I say "...from the Old Testament" simply because that's where we are in our Bible read through. [By the way, let me again encourage you to persevere in your daily Bible reading. If you have fallen behind – as I did for some weeks – just pick up right where we are at this point. Or, if you never began, you can jump right in on today's date.]

But I also focus on the Old Testament because that's where we find some of the thorniest difficulties in our understanding of the Bible. I also focus on the Old Testament because four out of every five pages of your Bible are from the Old Testament. As we address questions about the OT, we're addressing questions about four-fifths of the Bible.

Now I'm talking about questions like:

- Why does a good God allow such things as war and suffering?

- What's the deal with polygamy in the Old Testament? How is it that God's chosen people can have such dysfunctional families? And what is particularly disturbing is that God doesn't seem to do anything about it!
- And then we have questions about equal rights. How do we reconcile certain OT passages dealing with slaves, the treatment of women and of foreigners with a God who is just and fair?

These are some of the questions that we hope to address in the coming weeks. By the way, as we move through this series, I invite you to send me your questions by email. You can write to David@CentralBible.net. I may not be able to address each question in these messages, but I would like to interact with you personally.

My purpose this morning is to give you several principles straight from the Bible that will help in dealing with honest questions that arise in your reading of the Old Testament. Here's the first principle:

### **1. Begin with the claims that the Bible makes for itself.**

In America, one is considered innocent until proven guilty. But when it comes to the Bible, many presume the Bible to be false until proven true. However, *we need to begin with the claims that the Bible makes for itself.*

What are these claims? Turn with me to 2 Timothy 3:16, 17. If you are not too familiar with the books of the Bible and don't know where that is found, you can take the Bible from the seat in front of you and turn to the page indicated on the screen.

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV

What is "scripture?" Paul has already used this word in verse 15. Notice what he tells Timothy: "You have been taught the *holy Scripture* from childhood." Since the New Testament wasn't complete at the time Paul wrote this, he obviously refers in verse 15 specifically to the Old Testament. So Paul is saying that the Old Testament Scriptures, with its three main subdivisions (Law, Prophets and Writings), are "God-breathed."

And if the Old and New Testaments are "God-breathed" or "breathed out by God," then it follows that they are without error. Let's put this in the form of a syllogism (form of reasoning).

GOD CANNOT MAKE MISTAKES  
THE BIBLE IS GOD-BREATHED  
THEREFORE, THE BIBLE IS WITHOUT MISTAKES

That's why Jesus said, "Thy Word is truth." And that's why the early church Fathers, such as Iranaeus (2<sup>nd</sup> century) said: "*The Scriptures are indeed perfect, forasmuch as they are spoken by the Word of God and by His Spirit*" And Augustine (5<sup>th</sup> century) wrote: "*Let us therefore yield ourselves and bow to the authority of the Holy Scriptures which can neither err nor deceive.*"

So the principle is this: Begin with the claims that the Bible makes for itself. This isn't making a special exception for the Bible. Think about it. We apply this same principle in many areas of our daily life. Otherwise, life would be unlivable. Take, for example, the instructions on the medicine your doctor recently prescribed. You don't immediately presume that those instructions are false. You follow the prescription, in good faith. In some cases, if you don't you might be dead before you could ever prove anything! Or what if you went out of this auditorium and presumed that the restroom signs indicating "men" and "women" in the hallway were mistaken or had been intentionally changed? Well, you might be in for a big surprise! So as you come to the Bible you begin with the claims that the Bible makes for itself.

But you ask: What do I do then with the honest questions that I encounter? Do I live in denial? Do I try to ignore them? After all, doesn't God call us to intellectual honesty? This leads me to the second principle that has been helpful to me personally.

## **2. Recognize the role of doubt in the development of faith.**

The word "doubt" is a five-letter word. But unfortunately many Christians have turned it into a four-letter word. That is contrary to the teaching of the Bible. Jude says, "Be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22). As we look at the Bible, we find many believers who doubted. From the dark hole of a dungeon, John the Baptist sends word to Jesus, asking: "Are you *really* the one who is to come, or should we look for someone else?"

It's interesting that Jesus always distinguished between doubt and unbelief. Look at how Jesus treated honest doubters. Thomas came to Jesus, doubting his very resurrection. Did Jesus lecture him about the virtues of blind faith and brand him a heretic? No, he respectfully, graciously, and tolerantly *gave him the facts*.<sup>i</sup>

There is a vast difference between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is "I'm struggling to believe." Unbelief is "I won't believe." Doubt is honest; unbelief is hard – hardness of heart. Doubt looks for light; unbelief is settled in darkness.

The seeker of truth has nothing to fear. We don't need to fear our own questions. And we don't need to fear the questions of the skeptic. Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...and *mind*" (Matthew 22:17). God doesn't place a premium on ignorance or "blind" faith. He wants us to think. Our Christian faith is *not* a leap in the dark. We are rather to look before we leap.

So don't deny your doubts. Don't try to drown out your doubts. Rather, address your doubts and questions, asking God for insight.

## **3. Avoid common mistakes when wrestling with Bible difficulties.**

The third principle is this: *Avoid common mistakes when wrestling with Bible difficulties*. Let me mention several of the most important mistakes to avoid.

**Mistake #1: Assume that the unexplained is unexplainable.** Don't assume that discrepancies are contradictions. Don't assume that the unexplained is unexplainable. Often, further study and time will confirm the truthfulness of Scripture. For example, critics used to argue that Moses

could not have written the first five books of the Old Testament because writing was not yet developed in Moses' day. And yet as you explore any major museum today that has a department of Ancient Near Eastern studies, you will see just how ridiculous such a claim really was.

One of the most amazing recent discoveries took place in the ruins of a large copper-processing center in the lowlands of Jordan. There a team of international archaeologists found evidence that Edom was an advanced society as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Why is this important? For years, many scholars held that the Bible was in error in talking about the Edomites as a cohesive society in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. But once again, archaeology has demonstrated the truthfulness of the biblical account. Such discoveries tell me that I should not jump to the conclusion that the Bible is in error because there are certain things that are presently unexplainable.<sup>ii</sup>

**Mistake #2: Confuse my limited interpretation with God's truthful revelation.** Jesus says in Matthew 5:18 (speaking of the Old Testament by the way): "I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

That tells me that Jesus viewed the Old Testament as without error, down to the minutest details. So when I run across an apparent discrepancy or disturbing passage, I need to be humble enough to recognize that what I consider to be a discrepancy or difficulty may well be due to my own limited interpretation.

The fact that pencils have erasers and computers have delete keys should remind me that my present understanding of a puzzling passage may be in error. Our church secretary, Eileen, has this really cool system of "white out" that she keeps in the office. Why? It's there for correcting mistakes. That's how I need to approach my interpretation of Scripture: with an eraser, white out, a delete key. Notice, I said that's how I approach *my interpretation* of the Bible, *not* how I approach *the Bible*. There's a big difference.

I've experienced this just recently. I shared the other day with one of our pastors that I have recently changed in my understanding of a difficult passage in the Bible. I once held to a particular interpretation with conviction. But then I came across new information that led me to a different conclusion. Remember, the Bible is inspired, our interpretations are not.

I do not believe that ultimately there is a contradiction between science and the Bible. True science comes from God and it can never ultimately contradict what God has revealed in this Word. However, my fallible human *opinion* about science and the Bible can be contradictory.

**Mistake #3: Fail to understand the context of a passage.** It's been often said: "A text out of context is a pretext." This is probably one of the most common mistakes made in understanding – or should I say in *misunderstanding* – the Bible.

Here's an example. Did you know that the Bible says this? **THERE IS NO GOD!** (Psalm 14:1). If you were extremely depressed and opened your Bible in desperation and turned to this passage, and read only this phrase, it just might drive you to suicide!

But we must always consider the context. The entire verse says this:

The *fool* has said in his heart, “There is no God!” Psalm 14:1

Sometimes our failure to understand a passage or issue in the Old Testament is because we have not read the text within its context. And here, I’m not speaking only of the written context, but also the historical and cultural context. We’ll discover the importance of this principle as we look at certain questions in the coming weeks.

**Mistake #4: Forget that the Bible is a human book with human characteristics.** Some people assume that when we say that the Bible is “God-breathed,” we mean that God dictated these words to the various authors of the Bible. In this case, the biblical authors are nothing but “secretarial puppets” used by God to communicate his revelation to us. But this is not at all the meaning of inspiration. The fact is, very few sections of the Bible were “dictated.” We do have the Ten Commandments that were written by the very “finger of God” (Ex. 31:18). But this is the exception, not the rule.

This book, all the while being from God, is a very *human* book.

- Every book is the product of a *human writer* – about 40 of them in all.
- Because of this, it reflects different human *literary styles*, such as allegory, parable, narrative, and poetry.
- The books of the Bible show *human perspectives*. This is helpful in understanding a book like Ecclesiastes with its pessimistic outlook on life.
- Some of it is based on *human sources*, such as Luke’s gospel (Luke 1).
- It is characterized by *human thought patterns*, such as lapses of memory, as when Paul couldn’t recall whom he had baptized (maybe he was having a “senior moment”).

Because of this, the Bible often uses non-technical, everyday language. The Bible was written for the common person. For example, it speaks of the “sun rising” (Joshua 1:16). But so does the weatherman each evening on the local news. The Bible is not *unscientific*, it is simply *prescientific*.

**Mistake #5: Assume that the Bible approves of everything it describes.** The Bible is all true (John 17:17), but it contains some lies. For example, it records Satan’s lie to Adam and Eve. It records Ahab’s lie to the officials of Jericho (Josh. 2:4). The Bible also records many sins committed by people, but this does not mean the Bible approves of those sins.

This is an important principle. The Bible does not *prescribe* all that it *describes*. The Bible *describes* the adultery of King David, but certainly does not *prescribe* (i.e. encourage) us to commit adultery. The Bible *describes* the polygamy of many Old Testament believers. But this does not mean the Bible *prescribes* polygamy either then or today.

**Mistake #6: Forget that the Bible is *progressive revelation*.** The Bible was written over a 1600 year time-span. God doesn’t reveal everything at once. That means that some things recorded later in the Bible *may appear* to contradict what was previously stated. When God created Adam and Eve, he specifically stated that they should be strict vegetarians (Gen. 1:29). But later, after the flood, man was permitted to eat meat (Gen. 9:3). But this is not a contradiction. This is what we call *progressive revelation*.

The same is true today. You didn't come this morning with your offering of a cow or lamb to be sacrificed here on the platform, as believers did up until the time of Christ. Why? Because we now have the revelation of Christ's sacrifice that has paid for our sin.

We function the same way in our family life. I allowed my children, when they were one or two, to eat with their hands. But not long ago, Justin asked me if he could eat his green beans with his hands, and I said yes...I mean, no. Why? Progressive revelation. Commands are often suited to a particular time period and particular circumstances.

As we continue this series on *Tough Questions*, my prayer is that we as believers will honestly address questions and be prepared to give answers. Again, we may never find the complete answer to some questions this side of heaven. But God wants us to be honest seekers. And He wants to use us in sharing his truth with honest seekers.

The apostle Peter, who certainly went through his own personal journey of doubt, even to the point of denying Jesus Christ, says this:

But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect. 1 Peter 3:15

This is my prayer for our church family as we desire to be prepared to give an answer.

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<sup>i</sup> For certain of these thoughts I'm dependent upon Henry Drummond's "Dealing with Doubt" as found in Warren W. Wiersbe, *Listening to the Giants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 113-119.

<sup>ii</sup> Critics also used to claim that the Bible was wrong in speaking of the Hittites, because this group of people was totally unknown to historians. And yet the discovery of their library in Turkey has proven again just how wrong the critics really were.