

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lessons 80

Burning Questions, Quenching Answers

I. INTRODUCTION

There are a number of questions that folks have asked as this class draws to a conclusion. The questions are all very good and very thoughtful. As one might expect, these are not softballs lobbed in for this class. The questions are hard, and the answers aren't easy. We go into these questions not with great dogmatism on the answers. Dogmatism works well on easy issues. But thorny ones need fuller answers that may not have the greatest clarity. Some of these questions have troubled theologians for centuries. So, we will look at these questions, the major options in the answers, and even suggest which answer seems most likely to me!

II. QUESTIONS

Q: Matthew 27:45-46 states, “From the sixth hour to the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ – which means, ‘My God My God, why have you forsaken me?’” Jesus knew his purpose, and what he was to endure, and what would happen when he accepted our sins. Why did he make that statement?

A: This is a very good question. Think about it. If Jesus had awareness of what was going on, then why was he asking for an explanation?

As we answer, let's first remember certain aspects of Jesus as God incarnate. Orthodoxy teaches us that Jesus was fully human yet also fully God. We do not know how those two aspects combined in one man, but we know several things about the incarnated God. First, as Jesus, the omniscience of God was no longer there. In other words, Jesus did not have God's unlimited knowledge. Jesus, for example, states that no man knows the date of his second coming; only God knows. Jesus adds that even he, Jesus, did not know the date of his return (Mt. 24:36).

Consider also that Jesus was in the garden before the crucifixion and praying earnestly for “this cup” to pass. There, Jesus was careful to add his submission to God's will over his own desires (Mt. 26:39).

Now, shift scenes to the cross. What happened there? We know that Jesus took on our sins. Jesus became sin. We also know that God has no fellowship with sin. In fact, the “cup” Jesus prayed to pass is most likely the cup of God’s anger and punishment for sin. So, there are a number of theologians who contend that while Jesus was sin and hanging on the cross, God “turned his back” on Jesus. By that, we mean the perfect fellowship of the trinity was interrupted. God can have no fellowship with sin. Sin’s curse is death and separation from God. For Jesus to truly take on our sin and our punishment, Jesus must have suffered separation from God. The outward indication of this is the darkness that ascended on the scene.

Jesus then cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The cry is a bellow of isolation never before known. The force of the “why” is not necessarily a request for an answer to the crisis. Rather, we can understand the force of the “why” as an exclamation of abandonment and a wondering of what the answer will be. In a sense the “why” means, “to what” have you abandoned me?

Now, a second explanation that can go hand in hand with the first or merely be supplemental must be given. Jesus’ words are the opening verse of Psalm 22. Reading Psalm 22 shows it to be “Messianic.” By that, we mean the Psalm prophesies the coming Messiah in its language. This is the Psalm that says, “they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.” Some understand Jesus’ words to be an indication he was reciting the 22 Psalm, saying the first verse audibly loud enough to be heard. Reading the Psalm, this certainly makes sense, whether one accepts the first explanation or not. In the Psalm, it is apparent even the Psalmist understood God as a redeemer who was protecting even the one crying out “Why have you forsaken me?”

Q: 2 Timothy 3:16 states, “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.” Paul must have been referring to the scriptures at the time, which would have been the Law and Prophets. So why do so many people use this scripture and apply it to the NT as well?

A: There seems to be no doubt that when Paul wrote 2 Timothy, the only “scripture” Paul could be referencing would be the Old Testament. The New Testament had not yet been assembled. Some of the New Testament had likely not been written yet!

So, why do some use this passage in support of Biblical inspiration of the New as well as Old Testament? Several reasons! First, some people probably do not think it through enough and just automatically assume “all scripture” includes the New Testament.

Still, many others understand that Paul is writing about the Old Testament but still apply it to the New Testament today. Why this leap? Well, we now consider the New Testament scripture just as much as the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit was promised as a teacher and as a memory aid in John (14-16). The Holy Spirit was at work in the Apostles to teach and edify the church. Church history teaches us that the books assimilated into the New Testament met the early church’s litmus test of authoritative apostolic direction written under the guidance of God. In that sense, the New Testament is scripture on par with the Old Testament.

In second Peter, we read of Peter writing about Paul and Paul’s teaching. Peter references Paul’s writings and compares the reactions of some to the twisting those folks did of “other scriptures.” “Our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters...His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the *other* scriptures, to their own destruction” 2 Pet. 3:15-16. The clear indication here is that Peter considered the writings of Paul “scripture.”

Q: Matthew 16:17-19 states, “Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’” Some people view Peter as the first Pope and that the church is built upon Peter based upon what we read in Matthew 16:18. What do you think?

A: I disagree. I think the passage referenced has Jesus promising to build his church on the rock foundation of faith.

In the passage, Jesus asked the apostles who men say Jesus is. The various answers of others (“some say you’re Elijah, some say you’re John the Baptist”) are not the right ones! Jesus then asks the apostles, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Jesus blesses Peter and says that Peter, whose name means

“rock,” had spoken truly. Jesus then says that upon this “rock” Jesus will build his church. Is the “rock” that the church was built upon Peter?¹

Historically, the Catholic Church utilized this scripture to establish Peter as the supreme leader of the church. This was used to emphasize the authority of the Bishop of Rome, understanding Peter to be the first Bishop of Rome.

So why do I not agree with this? Several reasons. First, Jesus did not build his kingdom on any man. The kingdom of God is built on a rock foundation of faith. The confession of Peter that Christ is the Son of God is the foundation of the church. Now, Peter certainly had a role in that church. Peter held the keys to the church in the sense of Pentecost. It was Peter who “opened” the church preaching the first sermon where people first accepted Jesus as Messiah. That day there were over 3,000 added to the church (Acts 2). Peter continued in service to the church for the rest of his days. History teaches us that Peter died a martyr’s death in Rome in the mid-60’s.

So, what was the role of Peter in the church? How did the idea of Peter as Bishop/Pope of Rome get started? Come back for church history to hear that!

Q: Explain the idea of predestination

Oh, here’s an easy one!

A: There are two poles of thought that scholars have set up. Some scholars have taught that the ultimate choice of whether or not to accept Jesus and be saved is God’s choice. This is “predestination.” It typically holds that God picks and chooses who will receive Christ. These are the predestined ones to whom God sends his Spirit. Typically, those who teach this believe that humanity is so distant from God, so depraved, that apart from the work of God’s Spirit, no man may come to faith. This approach generally adds that once God’s Spirit comes to these chosen (called “the elect”), the work of the Spirit is “irresistible.” In other words, once God chooses the elect, once God sends his Spirit, the elect will make the choice for God. This approach is most common among the churches in the tradition of John Calvin. They include the Presbyterians and other

¹ There are two Greek words in play here. Peter is *Petros* (Πετρος), which means a detached rock or boulder. The word for the rock upon which Jesus will build his church is a feminine word, *petra* (πετρα), which is not a detached rock but rather a rocky shelf or cliff.

“Calvinistic” churches. Modern theologians who subscribe to this include R. C. Sproul. More on this in Church History Literacy!

The other pole of thought centers on the free choice of humanity. This teaches that mankind makes a free will decision whether to accept Jesus as Savior. God and his Spirit are not excluded from the process, but the choice and decision is up to man. Man can say yes or no.

There are a number of implications for each approach. People will often argue that if predestination is correct, then there is no reason to evangelize. “God has already picked who is going to heaven, why should we share our faith.” Of course, this issue is not a fair response to the doctrine. God tells us to evangelize and share out faith. We are to do it for that reason alone. How pathetic would our lives and our obedience be if we just honored the direction of God when we believed it made a difference! A similar implication is argued against opponents of predestination. It goes something like, “How dare you spend one cent of money or one moment of time on anything other than evangelism? What you may be doing is condemning some unknown people to Hell?” The theory is that anything other than full active evangelism is condemning the unreached to Hell.

What does scripture say on this issue? Scripture feeds both positions. From scripture, people on both sides of the issue find support. Paul speaks of predestination in a number of passages. In Romans, Paul notes that God “loved Jacob” and “hated Esau.” Paul said that God chose one over the other so mankind could know that we are God’s by his choice. Yet, standing against these passages are ones like Luke 13: 34 where Jesus mourns over Jerusalem. Jesus states, “Oh, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” For there to be no human choice in the matter makes the Messiah’s lament almost hypocritical. If no choice is there for man, then Jesus could have more clearly said, “How I would have gathered you under my wing as a hen does her brood, but I decided not to!”

So, where does this lead us? To each his own, but I would suggest somehow there is truth to both positions. Now, we can decide that God chooses and man chooses. We are to follow God’s commands to evangelize, but we are to understand that evangelism is God’s work. God is in charge. God will see that his church comes to faith.

How can these two independent poles exist together? It is hard for us to see in our space and time. Perhaps God makes his choices based upon his foreknowledge of what decision we would make.

Q: The Bible says that Jesus will be in the heart of the earth for 3 days and 3 nights. If Jesus was crucified on a Friday and arose on Sunday the math doesn't seem to work. Can you explain?

Hmmmm.... Multiple possibilities on this one! Come back next week!

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. The Bible is a rich storehouse for study.
2. Church History should be a good class!
3. The Love of Christ is beyond understanding.