



Bible Study Guide

No. 37

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Article selection by Terry Villiers
Text preparation and layout by Barry Austin
Printed at Publication Perspectives
by Phil Van Dijk
(03) 9561 1800

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EDITORIAL

By John Halford

One of my favourite biblical characters is the unnamed man who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and asked for healing. The disciples had been unable to drive out the demon, and the desperate man asked Jesus directly:

"...if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us."

"If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:22-24).

Now, there was an honest man. And if we are also honest, we will admit that there are times when our belief needs some help. We want to be so sure in our faith that nothing can shake us. Then something comes along and the cold, clammy fingers of doubt start clawing at our belief in God and his word. For example, ever since *The Da Vinci Code* hit the headlines, the integrity of the Bible has been under attack. Although most of us realize that *The Da Vinci Code* is a work of fiction, and that there is no basis to the allegations of the story, the book and movie raised the profile of some awkward questions about the Bible. Questions such as, How do we know the Bible is the inspired word of God? How can we be sure it has been translated accurately? And what about all those extra Gospels and epistles? Why didn't they make it into the Bible? Who decided what went in and what was left out?

These are questions most of us have never really asked, and they can be a bit unsettling and faith-eroding for some. It is tempting to just ignore the concerns and hope they will go away. But many people are made uneasy because of the biblical issues that have been raised. Perhaps you are too. So we need to talk about them. In this issue of *The MCF Bible Study Guide*, we will do that.

First, I must give you a word of warning. If you like neat, packaged answers with all the T's crossed and the I's dotted, you won't find that here. As they say on TV, turn to another channel now. But if you want to face some important issues, and come away still trusting the Bible as God's inspired word that is able to make us "wise unto salvation," then I think you are in for a pleasant surprise.

The truth—about anything—has nothing to fear from facts. But let's be clear what we mean by *facts*.

Science and mathematics can prove that two and two make four, and that sodium and chlorine make salt. However, not all facts can be established by scientific methods. Science can't prove why you love your children, or why we find some things beautiful and others ugly, or why some music is inspiring. We know these things are facts, but they are not subject to scientific proof.

The existence of God cannot be established beyond all doubt by the methods we use to prove things scientifically. I once asked a prominent Christian scientist what he would tell a genuine seeker who asked him to devise an experiment that would help him know if God existed. He thought for a moment, and then said gravely, "I think I would ask him to pray."

What at first might seem a cop-out is actually profound insight. God is not interested in being the result of a successful experiment. He wants our encounter with him to grow into a relationship. A relationship based on faith.

There has been a tremendous expansion of information about the early manuscripts and history of the Bible in recent years. These discoveries have altered our understanding about many aspects of the Bible. Much of the 19th-century scholarship that so vigorously asserted the absolute inerrancy of Scripture or its historical accuracy has been shown to be inadequate.

We now have a much better appreciation of how and when the books were written and how they all came together in the book we call "the Bible." The picture that emerges is more complex than we thought. But it in no way diminishes the Bible as the inspired word of God, a reliable guide to matters pertaining to salvation.

There is nothing to be gained by denying the facts, and nothing to lose by looking at them. I hope you will take the time to read the articles in our special section on the Bible in this issue of the magazine. I believe that you will see the Bible's relevance and meaning in a new way.

Ancient words... but ever true?

Can we still trust the Bible?

It used to be so easy, didn't it?

We had the King James Bible, perhaps with the words of Jesus in red. There was a column down the middle of the page that had some occasionally helpful references, and perhaps a wide margin where you could add your own "inspired" commentary. Like Henry Ford's automobiles, you could have any colour you wanted, provided it was black. And there was no question that this was the word of God.

Not now. There are dozens of versions of the Bible that come in a dazzling variety of bindings. Computer programs give us access to hundreds of reference works at the touch of a keyboard. And we have discovered that answers to hard questions and explanations of difficult scriptures are not as clear-cut as we once thought.

Even more ominously, we have seen the Bible itself come under increasing criticism. Ever since *The Da Vinci Code* captured popular imagination, there has been a rash of books about many so-called Gospels, epistles and other ancient writings that never made it into the official Bible. Other writers claim to have discovered coded information buried in the original Bible texts, revealing detailed predictions of major news events of our time.

Many of these books are just opportunistic productions, written quickly to cash in on the wave of interest created by Dan Brown's novel. But others are well researched, and written by serious scholars, well qualified to offer their point of view.

What are we supposed to make of this flood of information? Has there been a conspiracy to keep vital information from us? Is the Bible just a collection of old manuscripts gathered together and preserved by human beings? Can we still trust it as the word of God?

We must not be afraid to face these tough questions. And as we do, we hope to show you that there are answers, and that there is no reason to lose confidence in the book God gave "to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15).

But does the Bible contradict itself?

The answer is yes and no. The Bible is written in many literary styles. Some of these styles communicate in ways that we are not used to in the modern world. They use analogies, figures of speech and symbolic language that don't immediately make sense to us.

If everything in the Bible is taken in a crassly or simplistically literal manner, there will seem to be some contradictions. Even the most conservative reliable scholarly statements about Scripture admit that the Bible contains grammatical irregularities, exaggerations, imprecise descriptions and inexact quotations. We have to admit that 1 Cor. 1:14, for example, is an error, for Paul tells us that it is.

Our ability to understand and to reason is shaped by our personal experiences and the traditions and ways of thinking that shape our ideas and worldview. People living thousands of years ago had very different worldviews from ours. Even today, because of different traditions and experiences, equally sincere people come to different conclusions about what the Bible teaches, especially in regard to the details.

The Bible is not always as user-friendly as we have come to expect literature to be in the 21st century. But the main, overarching lessons of Scripture are not really controversial. As Mark Twain once said, "It ain't the parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand."

So can we still regard the Bible as a reliable guide to all aspects of life today?

Once again, yes and no. The Bible does not claim to tell us everything we need to know about all subjects, or even most subjects. When Scripture talks about the sun rising, as in Matthew 5:45 for example, its purpose is not to make a statement about astrophysics. When it calls a mustard seed the smallest seed (Matt. 13:31-32), it is not trying to give us a botany lesson. The Scriptures do claim to be a trustworthy guide for our relationships with God and with other humans. They give truth about faith, worship, salvation, morals and ethics (2 Tim. 3:15-

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16). But they do it in a way that can be understood by all people at all times.

Remember, the Bible is intended to reach out to people across the ages—in New Testament times, during the Dark and Middle Ages, through the 19th-century industrial revolution, the two World Wars, the last half of the 20th century—as well as today. And unless Jesus Christ returns in the near term, the Bible will still be reaching out with its message to countless future generations, whose technology may make us look like primitives.

So are you saying that the Bible is not historically reliable?

Compared to most other ancient writings it is very reliable. But its standard of accuracy is looser than the expectations of modern science and history. Genealogical lists may be incomplete (Matt. 1:8; 2 Chron. 22-24), the length of kings' reigns may be misinterpreted due to co-regencies, narrated events may be out of sequence (Matt. 4:18-22; 8:14; Luke 4:38-5:11), predicted events may not be fulfilled in every detail (Acts 21:11, 32-33; 27:10, 22), etc.

All biblical statements are true, but some are imprecise and incomplete. The "truth" about a subject does not require that we accept every biblical comment as historically or scientifically precise. Most alleged discrepancies in the Bible are easily resolved, and they do not alter the essential message of the story.

Each part of the Bible should be evaluated according to its own usage and purpose. Its purpose rarely includes details of history and science. Some things we need to know, and others we do not. God is not primarily concerned with whether we understand astrophysics, botany, and chronology, and we err if we try to use his inspired book for purposes for which it was not designed.

Are you saying it doesn't all apply to us?

Some parts of the Bible are designed for a specific situation in a specific culture, and it would be wrong for us to take them out of that context and indiscriminately impose our modern situations and ways of expressing ourselves on them. First-century Christians were advised to pray with their hands raised (1 Tim. 2:8). Slaves were advised to submit even to harsh masters (1 Pet. 2:18). Virgins were advised to remain virgins (1 Cor. 7:26). Women were told how to dress when they prayed (1 Cor. 11:5), and men were given advice regarding hair length (v. 14). Similarly, people were told to greet one another with a kiss. These behaviours were appropriate in first-century Mediterranean culture, but are not necessary in Western culture today.

If the apostles could speak in our culture, they would quote the Old Testament in a different way, or maybe even use different scriptures. Parables might refer more to urban life, and advice about slavery would not be included.

The Bible was written *in* a different culture and *for* a different culture. Its truths were given with words and styles shaped by that culture. The fact that it is able to speak across cultures, to address situations that never existed when it was written, is also a testimony to its abiding authority. Its timeless truths are given to us in cultural clothes.

Isn't that encouraging a "pick and choose" approach to living by every word of God?

No. At least, not in a way that allows you to just accept the parts that you like and discard what you don't. But most of us use a filter on the Bible—a filter that in most cases we haven't thought much about. We claim the Bible is an authority for our beliefs and practices, yet we rightly do not accept parts of it as being normative for our life.

For example, the Bible says you must destroy your house if it has persistent mildew (Lev. 14:43-45). But most of us would not take that seriously. Common sense clicks in to allow us to place this scriptural instruction in its original setting and purpose.

However, we are not suggesting that you should routinely ignore the Bible and follow your common sense. We do not have to choose between such extremes. But Christians should think about the *kind* of authority the Bible has. Its purpose is to introduce you to the good news of the kingdom of God, and to make you wise unto salvation.

So what advice do you give to someone who is reading some of these things for the first time?

Perhaps it will help to think of the Bible as a tree. Many Christians see that the tree is solid and well-rooted, and in that they are correct. But they may then assume that all its branches and even the smallest twigs are equally solid. They think they can place their ladder against any part of the tree without realizing that some of the twigs were never designed to carry such weight.

Small branches may support the ladder for a while, but when a strong wind blows, or some extra stress comes along, the ladder becomes unstable and possibly dangerous.

We need to begin at the trunk of the tree, and move out on branches only after testing them for stability. Some parts of the Bible are good for decoration, as it were, but not for support. They have value, but not always in the way we assume. They were inspired for one purpose, and we go wrong if we try to make them serve a different purpose. Never lose sight of the fact

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that the information in the Bible is there to make us "wise about salvation." You can trust it for that.

But once you say that Scripture has limitations, don't you open up a Pandora's Box?

You can believe some things without having cast-iron proof. There are some things that you must accept on faith. Not blind faith—but faith based on evidence and substance, as the epistle to the Hebrews says. A person who is committed to God has a reason to have faith. But you can't necessarily lay out those reasons in a scientific way that proves to an unbeliever that what you believe is true.

But neither can those who doubt lay out a scientific proof for their reasons. An atheist cannot prove that God does not exist, or that Jesus was not resurrected. So don't consider the evidence of your faith as somehow being an inferior kind of evidence in comparison with the faith of the sceptic.

Personal experience helps us understand that the Bible has authority. This is the book that has the courage and honesty to tell us about our own depravity, and the grace to offer us a cleansed conscience and eternal life. It gives us spiritual transformation and strength, not through rules and

commands, but in an unexpected way—through grace and the redemptive work of our Lord. The Bible testifies to the love, joy and peace we can have through faith—realities that are, just as the Bible describes, beyond our ability to put into words. This book gives us meaning and purpose in life by telling us of divine creation and redemption.

We realize that not everyone will be comfortable with that understanding. Others come to different conclusions about the reliability of the Bible. Some Christians believe that every word should be taken literally. Others claim that it is less reliable than we have described here. We respect their faith in Christ, but we repeat our belief, in summary, that the Bible is the inspired word of God, authoritative and reliable in matters of faith, worship, morals, and ethics.

So what about those "extra-Biblical" Gospels and epistles that didn't make it into the New Testament? Why didn't they? How do we know what should be in it?

...That is really worthy of a separate article, so read on.

Do we have the right books in the Bible?

By Mike Morrison

Who decided which books should be in the New Testament?

In Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code*, one of the main characters says that the Roman Emperor Constantine decided which books should be in the New Testament. He supposedly "commissioned and financed a new Bible, which omitted those gospels that spoke of Christ's human traits and embellished those gospels that made him godlike. The earlier gospels were outlawed, gathered up, and burned" (p. 234).

The Da Vinci Code, despite its claim to be based on fact, is actually fiction—and so is the above claim. It's not hard to find historical blunders in the book. Let's look at one—the question of canonization, or the way in which the New Testament books were collected into one book.

A "cannon" is an old-fashioned weapon; a "canon" (notice the difference in spelling) is a list of

authoritative books. "Canon" comes from the Greek word *kanon*, meaning measuring stick. A rough definition of canon is "the list of books that can be used in church to teach doctrine." There were many books and letters written in the early years of the church. So why do we have *these particular books in our present New Testament canon or Bible?*

A process

Historically, canonization can be seen as a process. It was not achieved by people meeting together to determine which books would be authoritative. The process occurred at different times in different places. No doubt, at first, the apostles and teachers in the early church told stories about Jesus, what he did, what he said, and what his death meant for us. In time, those stories were standardized and written down.

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The canonization process, though there was nothing official here in the sense of an approved list, probably began in the first century. For example, some people may have viewed the Gospel of Mark as an authoritative record of the life of Jesus even before the book of Revelation was written. Or they were reading Galatians in church before Romans was written.

As travelling Christians visited different areas, they discovered more writings and said, "That's a good book—can I make a copy?" (Remember, there was no instant and complete communication as there is today and no printing press.) The books that were most useful were copied by hand the most often. "Writings that proved, over time, to be most useful in sustaining, informing, and guiding the church in its worship, preaching, and teaching came to be the most highly valued, and gained a special authority in virtue of their usefulness" (H. Gamble, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, p. 857).

Gradually, various books were accepted as Scripture, and only later did the church begin to draw boundary lines as to which books could be called Scripture and which were part of a collection of authoritative and helpful writings (that is, a canon).

Polycarp, who lived early in the second century, often quoted from the New Testament, but in most cases he introduced the quotes with comments like "Jesus said," "Paul writes," etc. To Polycarp the words of Jesus had authority *as the words of Jesus*, not because they were recorded in an approved book.

Irenaeus, around the year 180, quoted the New Testament more than 1,000 times. He clearly believed that the books from which he quoted were authoritative for Christian teaching—and Irenaeus was "quoting Scripture" more than a century before Constantine. However, Irenaeus also called other books Scripture, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

Clement of Alexandria, around the year 200, has over 3,000 quotes from the New Testament, but he doesn't quote several of the non-Pauline, or general epistles; they were apparently not in his canon. Tertullian, who lived in North Africa about the same time, quoted from all New Testament books except 2 Peter, James, and 2-3 John. Similarly, Hippolytus of Rome did not quote from James, 2 Peter, 3 John, and Jude. Cyprian of Carthage (mid third century) quoted almost 900 New Testament verses, but he had nothing from Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, or Jude.

In these writings, well before Constantine, everyone accepted Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts, and the letters of Paul, but there were some uncertainties about the general epistles.

Different sections at different times

The four Gospels were accepted early on, although some people were a little troubled that there were four different-but-authoritative versions of the ministry of Jesus. In Syria, Tatian merged all four Gospels together in his *Diatesseron*, but in the Western Empire, the Gospels were accepted as a group of four. Irenaeus even argued that four is the divinely sanctioned number.

The writings of Paul were accepted early on as definitive for Christian belief and practice. Although there was a little disagreement about which books he actually wrote, it was agreed that those he wrote were authoritative. Acts was also widely accepted, probably because it was written by Luke, the author of an accepted Gospel.

There was widespread agreement about the vast majority (20 out of 27 books) of the New Testament. The disagreements were about a few smaller books—the tail end of the Bible. Specifically, there were some reservations about Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 & 3 John, Jude, and Revelation, and this lasted for centuries.

Eusebius recognized only one authentic epistle of Peter, and 2 Peter was rarely used. Second and Third John were little used until the fourth century, and were not in the lists of Origen and Eusebius. The epistle of Jude also had a mixed reception, perhaps because Jude quotes *1 Enoch*, which was rarely considered authoritative.

There were a few additional books that were occasionally counted as authoritative: 3 Corinthians, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the first letter of Clement of Rome, the letters of Ignatius, Barnabas, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Acts of Paul, the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Thomas. Some of these are now in the collection called the apostolic fathers; others are deemed heretical. Some of these were widely recommended, and the extreme boundaries of the canon were somewhat blurred for many years. Even as late as the sixth century, Codex Claromontanus does not include Hebrews, but it does include Barnabas, Hermas, the Acts of Paul, and the Apocalypse of Peter.

Criteria

In general, early church leaders looked at three criteria:

1) Antiquity and apostolicity—whether a book had been written by an apostle or someone associated with the apostles, such as Mark or Luke,

2) Orthodoxy—was the writing in agreement with traditional doctrines accepted from the beginning of the church, and

3) Consensus—whether many churches in diverse locations were using the book. Although there was no

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formula for applying these criteria to various books, these are the kind of norms or principles mentioned when a church leader comments on whether a particular book is to be accepted or rejected.

Often, no reason was given at all for a book to be considered authoritative in a canonical sense—it was simply said that we accept this book, but not this other one. Some books were widely accepted because many people had found them useful from the time they were written; other books were not. The church fathers said little about the determining factors, because the canon developed gradually, rather than being based on one person's authority.

Surprisingly, "inspiration" was not a factor at all, since that was a much broader and rather indefinite category. Even sermons were considered "inspired"; the fact that a document was inspired was not proof that it was also canonical. Everything in the canon was considered inspired, but not everything considered inspired was in the canon.

Attempts to list the canonical books

The earliest undisputed list of books comes from Eusebius, in the 320s. "Even though he reported that some lists preceded his, including lists supposedly from Clement of Alexandria and Origen...these lists were more likely inventions of Eusebius which he constructed from his own tabulation of the references to the New Testament Scriptures that Clement and Origen cited" (Lee McDonald, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, p. 135).

Eusebius noted that the following books were disputed: James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Acts of Paul, Shepherd of Hermas, Apocalypse of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Didache, and possibly Revelation. Eusebius wrote at the time of Constantine, and he gives not even a hint that Constantine had any opinions about which books ought to be accepted. If Constantine did try to settle the question, he was quite unsuccessful. No authoritative list comes from him.

The Cheltenham canon (probably mid fourth century) omitted James, Jude, and Hebrews. Codex Sinaiticus (fourth century) includes all the modern canon plus Barnabas and Shepherd of Hermas. The Council of Laodicea (363) omitted some of the general epistles and Revelation. Athanasius of Alexandria gave a list identical to our modern canon in the year 367, but not everyone followed his list.

Canon lists were part of the council of Rome (382), the synod of Hippo (393) and two councils at Carthage (397, 419), but none of these councils represented the church at large. The Trullan synod held in Constantinople in 691-2 ratified the lists of several previous councils, even though they contradicted one another. Carthage had accepted all

the general epistles and Revelation, whereas Laodicea had rejected some of them.

Rome did not officially rule on the canon until the Council of Florence (1439-43). The council of Trent (1546) made the current list of New Testament books an article of faith, but only by a minority vote—24 in favour, 15 against, and 16 abstentions. But the Greek Orthodox Church certainly did not get its canon from Roman authority.

None of the councils *made* a book canonical—the council could merely affirm that a book had already been used from the earliest history of the church and that it could continue, in fact, to be so used.

Some of the Reformers questioned the canon, and "Luther's lower estimate of four books of the New Testament is disclosed in the Table of Contents, where the first twenty-three books from Matthew to 3 John are each assigned a number, whereas, after a blank space, the column of titles, without numbers, continues with Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation" (Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 242).

No more and 'No. More'

What prompted the leaders to draw up a list of books considered to be authoritative for faith? Two factors may have played important roles: 1) heretics such as Marcion had their own list of books, and 2) fourth-century persecutors wanted to burn the Christians' sacred writings while the Christ wanted to hide them. But exactly which books were they to hide?

Marcion had created his own abridged list of books from those accepted by the general church as being authoritative. In effect, he chose his favourites from an already-existing list of Gospels and epistles. The church responded to Marcion's abbreviated canon with, No—*more* than that. But to the Gnostics and Montanists, who wanted to add new books, the church responded with, *No more* than this! The fact that Marcion felt compelled to create a truncated list or canon speaks to the fact that certain books were already considered authoritative for the church even at this early date—long before Constantine.

When Constantine accepted Christianity, he ordered 50 high-quality copies of the Scriptures to be distributed to ensure teaching uniformity throughout his empire. But he apparently had nothing to say about which books were in those copies. Even well after Constantine, Amphilochius of Iconium (in Asia Minor) rejected 2 Peter, 2-3 John, Jude, and Revelation. If Constantine tried to fix the canon, he failed.

John Chrysostom (c. 400) had 11,000 quotes from the New Testament, but none from 2 Peter, 2 or 3 John, Jude or Revelation. Although he may have seen

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a list saying that those books were canonical, the list could not make him use them!

In the West, things were more stable, since there was a central authority telling everyone to accept the Vulgate translation, which contains all the New Testament books accepted today. Even so, more than 100 (out of 8,000) manuscripts of the Vulgate include the spurious epistle to the Laodiceans.

Authority today

Is the canon a list of authoritative books, or an authoritative list of books? Does the authority of each book come from itself, or from the fact that it is included in a list? Is the canon independent of church authority, or dependent on church authority? Probably the best answer is a little of both.

Many of the books were recognized as intrinsically authoritative; the early church leaders recognized that the books were authoritative even before anyone voted on anything. They were merely ratifying what was already customary. That was the case with the Gospels, Acts, and the epistles of Paul—the vast majority of the New Testament. On the other hand, some of the disputed books eventually gained

widespread acceptance not so much on their own, but because they were included in a list by various church leaders and councils.

The canon was determined by long-standing Christian tradition—a tradition that had been shaped by those very books. Practically speaking, we cannot add any more books, nor take any away from our New Testament canon; the vast majority of the church would resist any such changes. We basically have to trust that God has guided his people in such a way that what we have presents a faithful witness to the gospel and is an accurate record of God's revelation to humanity.

As you can see, *The Da Vinci Code* has little connection with the facts of history. Constantine had nothing to do with choosing which books would be in our Bibles. For the vast majority of the New Testament, the churches had already made the decision (based on an existing long-time tradition of use) more than a century before Constantine. And for the areas of uncertainty, Constantine did not settle anything one way or another.

Church History Corner

William Tyndale And the Birth of the English Bible

On October 6, 1536, Englishman William Tyndale (c.1494-1536) was strangled by the civil executioner in Belgium and his dead body was burned at the stake. His crime? Tyndale had translated the New Testament and major portions of the Old Testament from the original languages into English so that all English-speaking Christians could read the Scriptures in their own tongue.

Persecution and Bible burning

In our time, we are privileged to have access to a wide variety of Bible translations in English. The idea that a Bible translator could be hunted down like a criminal and his Bible translation burned and destroyed seems shocking.

Why did such a tragedy happen? Let's briefly explore the religious-political situation in England between 1380 and the 1530s for the answer.

We begin with the first English version of the Bible, translated and published in 1380 by John

Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384).¹ The Oxford theologian, Wycliffe was a severe critic of what he believed was a corrupt Church. He hoped that people could be called back to a more biblical faith, and for this to happen he was convinced that they needed to read the Bible in their own language. By producing a translation, Wycliffe ran afoul of Church authorities. The few Wycliffe Bible copies in existence were banned by a synod of clergy in Oxford in 1408. In fact, the edict was issued against any unauthorized translation of the Bible into English.

Wycliffe was pronounced a heretic and was called "a son of the old serpent, forerunner and disciple of Antichrist" by the English Archbishop.² In 1415, the Church Council of Constance condemned Wycliffe's writings and ordered his bones to be dug out of the ground and to be burned. We can now begin to understand why Tyndale and his Bible translation would also not be appreciated. Church authorities of the time seemed to take a dim view of Christian folk

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having the Bible in their own tongue. In the words of Church historian Philip Schaff, "Down to the very end of its history, the Medieval Church gave no official encouragement to the circulation of the Bible among the laity. On the contrary, it uniformly set itself against it."³

The Protestant Reformation begins

Tyndale would obviously be in danger of the Church hierarchy solely on the basis of his producing an unauthorized English translation. However, Tyndale had two strikes against him because he was also enmeshed in the Protestant Reformation, which was in full swing by the time he completed his New Testament in English in 1526. The first shot of the Reformation had been fired nine years earlier, when Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. (Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1522.)

Tyndale had thrown in his lot with the Reformers and was highly critical of the Church structure in England. We could concede that the established church in England had no real case for objecting to a Bible in English, except perhaps on the traditional view that it was unhealthy for people to actually read the Bible for themselves. However, church officials also objected to the virulent commentary that Tyndale's New Testament contained. This gave the high clergy the rationale to condemn Tyndale and seize copies of his translation.

A determined Tyndale

Tyndale was aware of the dangers of embarking on the translation project he was contemplating. However, he was convinced that the common people must be able to read the Bible in order to be called back to the biblical gospel. In one debate with a cleric, he vowed that if God spared his life, he would see to it that the plowboy would know more about Scripture than untutored priests.

Tyndale first approached Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall (or Tonstall) of London in 1523 to request permission to translate the Bible into English. He hoped that the bishop would both authorize his translation work and also provide him with a residential chaplaincy so he could support himself financially during his project. The bishop denied both requests and suggested Tyndale look for employment elsewhere.

The next year Tyndale decided to go to the Continent, where with the support of a group of British merchants, he completed his translation of the New Testament. Tyndale found a printer in Cologne, but opponents raided the printing establishment. Escaping with the pages that were already printed, he headed to Worms, Germany, where his full New

Testament in English was printed in 1526. The first printing of 6,000 copies was then smuggled into England.

Church officials in England, especially in London, did everything they could to intercept copies of Tyndale's New Testament and destroy them. But copies kept appearing, to the chagrin of Bishop Tunstall. He hit upon the idea of buying up as many copies as possible within his diocese and then destroying them. Once he accomplished his aim, the bishop held a public burning of these New Testament copies at St. Paul's cathedral.

Despite this campaign against Tyndale's New Testament, new copies kept appearing in England. Tunstall then conceived of a plan to buy up large numbers of copies on the Continent before they made their way to England and then destroy these as well. The bishop made an agreement with a merchant in Antwerp, Belgium, Augustine Packington, to buy all of

Tyndale's remaining printed New Testaments. Tyndale was made privy to this plot and readily agreed to sell the copies. He would use the money he received to publish a new edition and have even more copies to distribute. The bishop's plot was foiled. In the words of one Edward Halle, a chronicler of the times: "And so forward went the bargain: the bishop had the books, Packington had the thanks, and Tyndale had the money."⁴

More translation, opposition and Tyndale's death

Meanwhile, Tyndale traveled to Antwerp, Belgium, where he began translating the Old Testament into English. By 1530, he had completed and published the English translation from the Hebrew of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament.

Tyndale is also considered to have translated the historical Old Testament books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, though his translation did not appear in his lifetime. As Tyndale was involved in the theological disputes of the day and because he was hounded by those seeking to capture him, he was unable to complete the translation of the entire Old Testament.

Tyndale's second edition of the New Testament was finished in 1534. It was his definitive work, and it is this edition that served as the basis of the 1611 King James Authorized Version.

As Tyndale worked in Antwerp, Belgium, the agents of King Henry VIII and other opponents were scouring Europe, hoping to find and capture him. Tyndale was betrayed by a fellow Englishman, kidnapped and arrested on May 21, 1535. He was incarcerated in a Belgian fortress and eventually brought to trial for heresy and found guilty. The verdict condemning him to death came in August

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1536. On October 6 of the same year he was executed at Vilvorde, Belgium.

Tyndale's final prayer, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," is said to have been directed to English King Henry VIII (1491-1547). His prayer was a hope that the king would allow copies of the Bible in English to be circulated. Tyndale's prayer had already been answered. An English version of the Bible that drew on his translation work was in circulation before his death. Three years after Tyndale's death, Henry required every English parish church to make a copy of the English Bible available to parishioners.

In the biblical books that Tyndale translated, perhaps up to 90 percent of his wording is found in the King James Authorized Version and the Revised Standard Version. But where the 1611 Authorized

Version departed from Tyndale's translation, later revisers of this version often returned to it. For his pioneering work of translation, William Tyndale is considered the "Father of the English Bible."

1 Wycliffe's translation was made before the invention of moveable type and the printing press. All copies of his Bible had to be written out by hand. Also, his version was not a translation of the original languages in which the books of the Bible were first written.

2 David Ewert, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, page 184.

3 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. vi, page 722.

4 From Halle's 1548 chronicle of England from Henry IV to Henry VIII in F. F. Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, page 38.

One Pilgrim's Progress

Let God be God

By Mike Feazell

May I ask you a couple of personal questions? You don't have to respond out loud; silent answers will do. The answers are for you, not for me.

Here's the first question: Has your child ever gotten a bit rebellious, uncooperative or disrespectful?

And here's the second: Did you punish him or her? Remember, just a silent answer. No need to raise your hand.

Now let me ask you this: How long did the punishment last? More to the point, Did you decree that the punishment would last forever?

The very idea of it sounds crazy, doesn't it?

We, as weak and imperfect parents, forgive our kids for their "sins" against us. We might even punish them, but I wonder how many of us would think it fitting, or even sane, to punish them for the rest of their, or our, lives.

Yet some Christians would have us believe that God, our heavenly Father, who is not weak and imperfect, punishes forever and ever people who have never even heard the gospel. And fascinatingly, these same people call God the God of grace and mercy.

Let's think about it for a moment. Jesus tells us to love our enemies, and yet some Christians think God

not only hates his enemies, but burns them mercilessly and relentlessly for eternity.

Jesus prayed for his killers, saying, "Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing." But some Christians teach that God only forgives certain people, the ones he predestined to forgive before he even created the Earth. Which, if true, means that Jesus' prayer didn't make a whole lot of difference.

On our heads?

How often have you heard someone giving their "witness" speak about how miserable and guilty they felt over failing to present the gospel to someone who died? One Christian youth leader recently told a group of college kids a morbid story about how he met a person and talked to him, and felt an urge to present the gospel, but then didn't actually do it during their conversation. Then he learned that the man died, hit by a car, later that same day.

"That man is in hell right now," he told the young, wide-eyed, Christian students, "suffering indescribable agony." Then with a dramatic pause, he added, "and all that's on my head." He told them how he suffers nightmares about what he has done, and how he lies in bed sobbing over the horrible truth that

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because of him, this poor wretch will suffer the torments of fiery hell forever.

I marvel at the way some people can so expertly juggle their faith on the one hand that God so loved the world that he sent Jesus, with their faith (yes, it takes faith) on the other hand that God is so shockingly inept at actually saving people that he sends them to hell based on *our* incompetence. Standing steadfastly in faith in God's power and love with one part of their minds, they actually believe at the same time that God's hands are tied to save people if *we* fail to get to them in time.

"You are saved by grace and not by works," they say (rightly so), and yet they somehow have taken a most baffling detour to come up with the patently anti-gospel idea that people's eternal destiny is determined by *our* success or failure in the work of evangelizing.

Nobody slips through Jesus' fingers

As much as we humans love our kids, how much more does God love them? It's a rhetorical question—

God loves them infinitely more than we are even able to love them.

Jesus said, "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead?... If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11:11-12).

God really does love the world. And the salvation of what God loves depends on God, not how good we are at telling the gospel story. And God is really good at what he does.

So if you're carrying a burden of guilt about someone you didn't get the gospel to before he or she died, why not hand that burden over to Jesus? Nobody slips through his fingers, and nobody goes to hell because of you. (Who do you think you are, anyway?)

Our God is good and merciful and strong. And you can trust him to be that way for everybody, not just for you.

Mike Feazell
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Dealing with difficulties

A study of Hebrews 12:1-17

After mentioning a long list of heroes who were faithful in difficult times, the author of Hebrews now addresses the readers directly, encouraging them to follow the example of the faithful. They should acknowledge the hardships they encounter—even be encouraged by them—and complete the journey they have begun.

Finish the race

In Hebrews, doctrinal information is often the springboard for practical application. After each section of information a brief section of exhortation comes, often with the words "therefore, let us..." Chapter 12 begins with *Therefore; since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*

What kind of witnesses surround us? Perhaps they are spectators in a stadium, watching us run the race—but since the author hasn't used the metaphor of a footrace yet, the readers probably would not think of "witness" in that sense. Rather, the witnesses are people who can testify that it is possible to be faithful in the face of temptations, even in persecutions.

Examples of success surround us, so we should get rid of anything that distracts us, anything that slows us down—especially sin. Sin is like an octopus that grabs us first with one tentacle, then another, and another, until we are trapped. Sin makes it harder for us to follow Christ, or to trust in him for our salvation. So, to be faithful, we need to put aside sin or any other hindrance.

And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter particeps of our faith (vv. 1-2). Here, the Christian life is compared to a race, perhaps a marathon, in which finishing the race is more important than coming in first. How can we finish? By keeping our eyes on the goal: Jesus. He is not only the one who calls us to faith in the beginning; he is also the one who will complete his work within us.

What kind of example did he set for us? *For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God* (v. 2). Jesus kept his eyes on the goal—the joy set before him. Our salvation is the joy that motivated Jesus to endure the pain and shame of the cross. The cross shows us how much Jesus wants us to join him

in his joy, to join him in his position of honour and authority next to God. And this sets an example that can help us endure our difficulties.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (v. 3). If we think about what he did, we will be encouraged to put up with the inconveniences that Christianity may bring us. As we focus on him, he will strengthen the faith within us.

As the author observes, the readers had not experienced what Jesus did: **In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood** (v. 4). We should be willing to give our lives, because the life we have gained is far more than anything we might give up.

Children and discipline

The author then quotes Prov. 3:11-12 to give the readers a better way to view their problems: **Have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as children? It says, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his child." Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children** (Heb. 12:5-7).



This does not mean that every problem we face has been specifically caused by God, or that it is a punishment for something we did wrong. But problems can be turned for good in our lives if we look at them as athletic training that can help us be stronger and more faithful.

In the Christian life, difficulties are to be expected: **For what children are not disciplined by their parents? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate children at all** (vv. 7-8). In Greek society, wealthy men often had mistresses, and they often had illegitimate children. They sent their legal children to school and trained them, but they often ignored their illegitimate children.

Moreover, we have all had human parents who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! Our parents disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness (vv. 9-10).

He is speaking in general terms here, not commenting on parents who are too strict or abusive. Human discipline has temporary benefits, but divine discipline has eternal benefits, so we should be even more willing to endure it.

This is not always easy, but we will fare better if we are mentally prepared for it. **No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it** (v. 11). We may not see those results right away—especially peace—but we will enjoy the results if we endure the difficulties.

Therefore, since discipline has good results in our lives, **strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed**" (vv. 12-13, quoting Prov. 4:26). Don't let the problems cause you to drop out of the race. Run straight toward the goal, even though it's hard.

Don't be like Esau

The author now shifts gears and makes a general exhortation: **Make every effort to live in peace with everyone—don't seek persecution—and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord** (v. 14). Since Jesus makes us holy by his death (10:10, 14), we need to trust in him for the status we need to see God.

But there is a danger: **See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many** (v. 15). How might people fall short of God's grace? The "bitter root" probably refers to Deut. 29:18, which describes someone who turns away from God. If we turn away from Christ, we will not receive his benefits.

See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done (vv. 16-17).

Esau is an example to avoid: He gave up a long-term blessing for a short-term benefit. This is the choice the readers were facing, too: Would they give up eternal life with Christ for a little convenience in this world? If you do this, the author says, the time will come when the penalty will be irreversible. Esau repented in one sense—he decided he wanted the blessing—but it was too late, because it was part of the inheritance he had already sold.

Do not sell out the faith, the author says. Stand firm, and be faithful—and we do that by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Questions for discussion

- What kind of sin tends to entangle people today? (v. 1)
- What pulls them away from faith in Christ?
- What joys are set before us? (v. 2)

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- Do people now have different attitudes about parental discipline? (v. 9)
 - How does this affect our attitude toward difficulties we may face?
- In what way were the Old Testament heroes waiting for us? (v. 40)

Michael Morrison
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Lessons from Mark

A lesson about faith

Lesson 29 - Mark 6:1-6

Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him that he even does miracles! Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offence at him.

Jesus said to them, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honour." He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.

When the prophet Samuel was looking for the right man to anoint king over Israel, God sent him to the house of Jesse. Jesse's grandmother was the Moabitess, Ruth, and his great-grandma was the infamous woman of Jericho, Rahab, and an unlikely family in which to find the most famous king of Israel. But if that were not enough, when Jesse brought out his eldest and most accomplished son to meet Samuel, God said, "No, Sam, that's not him."

Samuel went through seven of Jesse's boys, and God turned thumbs down on every one. Perplexed, Samuel asked Jesse, "Are you sure that's all your kids?"

"Yeah," Jesse said. "That's it. Well, except for David, of course, but there's no way he's the one you're looking for. He's nothing but a sheep kid. He's out there with the sheep now—definitely not king material."

All Jesse's boys nodded and a couple snickered. "Definitely not king material."

"Listen, Samuel," Jesse said. "These are all fine boys here. Why don't you ask the Lord again, because you can bet your sandals that if one of my boys is going to be king, it'll be one of these. David's nothing special, and frankly, things are better around here when he's off with the sheep."

Samuel shook his head, eyeing the imposing lineup of Jesse's boys. Tall, good looking, and probably good warriors, he figured. Why does the Lord always have to pick the low enders? He smiled. He himself was a bit of an unlikely choice too, come to think of it. If it hadn't been for his mom's crazy vow, he might

have been a normal kid instead of growing up in the tabernacle cleaning linen and hauling water for old Eli.

"No, the Lord says it's none of this bunch. You'd better go fetch this David out of the pasture." He shrugged. "With the Lord, you never know. I had to pull Saul out from behind a pile of grain sacks, you know. The kid was shaking like an olive leaf."

With a laugh, the prophet added: "The Lord doesn't see people the way we do. He's not into looks and all that folderol."

You know what happened. David's brothers must have been a little miffed that little brother David was anointed king instead of one of them. Maybe they felt a little like the sons of Jacob, who resented the way their dad made over spoiled little Joseph as if the older kids were little more than glorified ranch hands.

It was no different with Jesus. How can somebody you grew up with, somebody you might have watched grow up, somebody whose habits and idiosyncrasies often got on your nerves, suddenly start acting as though he thought he was somebody? Just who in Galilee does this guy think he is?

Woody Allen once said, "I wouldn't want to belong to any club that would have me as a member." Or maybe it was Mark Twain. Or Groucho Marx. Or all of them. Anyway, the people of Nazareth must have had a similar policy: "Anybody from around here has got to be a loser; just look at us. No, we don't care if he can do miracles, this guy has got to be a fraud."

So Jesus said his famous line: "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house

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is a prophet without honour" (Mark 6:4, NIV). You might not remember it quite like that, but don't forget the King James Version is nearly twice as old as the United States; a little modern English is good for the soul. Jesus said it in Aramaic, anyway, and none of us would make that out, even if we've studied it, because understanding someone's pronunciation from 2,000 years ago is different from reading it today.

But we digress. The lesson we're drawing out of this passage is that we're a whole lot more enamoured with impressive strangers than we are with the people we already know all too well. That helps account for sexual affairs, you know. It's all in the mystery. If you really knew the goofball you were shacking up with for the night the way his or her relatives and friends do, you'd stay a million miles away. But alas, we have

more respect for people we don't even know than for those we do.

It was in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, that he could heal only a few people. Why? Because they didn't believe he could possibly be a healer. They could not accept one of their own as being somehow greater than they were, even if it meant foregoing the healing he could have brought them. Faith and humility don't travel without each other. Trusting Jesus means seeing yourself in need of him. Knowing your need for him generates trust in him. He's in town, your town, right now. Trust him with your burdens. Let him give you rest. It's you he's come to see.

Mike Fezell
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Mooolbark Christian Fellowship

Tel. (03) 9726 8898