

## STUDIES IN CONTRASTS



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## STUDIES IN CONTRASTS

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An old rumor has it that "the good book" is a library of contradictions. It is said by some that the real genius of this bestseller is that, like other successful "fortune tellers," it covers its predictions with enough broad, obscure, and contradictory statements to be able to hide in the tangle.

But is that really the truth about the Bible? Or is there some way to resolve its alleged contradictions? We offer the following pages to you with the confidence that the more of the Bible you understand, the less you will wonder about its overall unity, consistency, and reliability.

*Martin R. De Haan II*, President of RBC Ministries



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## DOUBLE-TALK

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Does the Bible contradict itself?

"Yes," responds the well-groomed businessman. "The way it looks to me, the Bible does contradict itself. I think it is riddled with inconsistencies."

"Show me one," says a second-year college student, counting on a sophomoric bet that the critic hasn't done his homework.

"I can't think of a specific," says the self-appointed authority, "but I know they're there."

"I can," says another. "In some places the Bible says God loves everybody. In other places it says there are some people He hates. And sometimes the biblical authors contradict themselves before the ink has had a chance to dry on their first statement. For instance, within the space of two sentences the author of Proverbs says that a wise man will and will not try to answer a fool (26:4-5). What kind of sense does that make?"

"A lot of sense," says a little old man with baggy pants and a grey-white shirt marked by a mustard stain on the pen-laden left pocket. "The Bible only seems to contradict itself to those who don't understand it."

"Sir, with all due respect," the other responds, "the Bible makes sense only because you want it to make sense."

"And is it possible that you'd rather it didn't make sense?" replies the old man. "Does your live-in girlfriend and your life-risking wager that this life is all you need to worry about make you a good judge of the Book that judges you?"



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## WHAT'S AT STAKE?

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Is the issue of double-talk important? It is if your employer promises you he's going to give you a raise and then a few days later tells you that he was only thinking about it. It's important if a politician is caught talking out of both sides of his mouth, or if a teacher sends mixed signals about what you can expect on the final exam. It's serious if you rent from a landlord who keeps changing his story about whether he's going to raise your rent.

It's even more serious if the Bible gives you mixed signals about what God thinks of you. It is absolutely essential for you to know whether you can trust this Book.

**If the Bible contradicts itself,  
how can we believe what it says  
about us, about God, or about  
anything else?**

Does God really know every thought that is in our mind? (Psalm 139:1-6). Does He care about what happens to us? (Matthew 6:25-34). Is He willing to forgive the worst of our sins? (1 Corinthians 6:11). All of these things are in doubt if the Bible is a book of double-talk and self-contradiction.



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## WHERE ARE THE CONTRADICTIONS?

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It's important for our theory to fit the facts of the case before us. On this question, the fact is that the Bible does appear to contradict itself. (1) It appears that way to the unbelieving critic. (2) It appears that way to the Christian who works hard to harmonize those passages of history, ethics, or prophecy that seem to be in conflict with one another. (3) It appears to the casual reader that the Bible is less than consistent. He's confused by the fact that the Bible says:

1. We should/should not be afraid of God.
2. God is in control/Satan is in control.
3. Christ was less than/equal with the Father.
4. We are/are not saved by faith alone.
5. Salvation is once-for-all/continuous.
6. We can/cannot come to God as we are.
7. Self-esteem is dangerous/healthy.
8. With faith we can/cannot do everything.
9. We should/should not follow men.

But does the fact that the Bible seems to contradict itself mean that it actually does? We can't afford to jump to a wrong conclusion. The issues are too important. Too much is at stake to casually dismiss a book of the Bible's stature just because it appears at times to contradict itself. There is too much to be said for this Book that has inspired more faith, more hope, more love, more honesty, more hard work, more social reform, and more justice than any other book the world has ever known.



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## WHY AREN'T THERE MORE?

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A look at a few other facts could easily cause us to ask a question different from the one proposed on the cover of this booklet. We could ask, "Why doesn't the Bible appear to contradict itself more often?"

**Seven Obstacles To Unity.** (1) The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years, (2) in several different languages, (3) by 40 different authors (4) from many walks of life and (5) from several geographic locations in the Mideast. (6) These authors claim to speak in behalf of a God who describes our situation from His own infinite, eternal perspective. (7) Yet these authors also approach those same issues from the perspective of people caught up in the intense emotions, ecstasies, and agonies of human experience.

**Seven Evidences Of Unity.** In spite of these obstacles, the Bible shows amazing unity when it comes to describing (1) the personality and character of God, (2) the personality and character of man, (3) the human need for salvation, (4) the need for a substitutionary blood sacrifice to accomplish that salvation, and (5) the anticipation and coming of a promised Messiah-Savior described as "God with us." Beyond that, the Bible shows unity (6) in the way it uses public miracles and fulfilled prophecies to support its spiritual claims and authority. Its claims are not left to the philosophy, idealism, or good intentions of its authors. The message of the Old Testament was confirmed by events as physical as the Flood, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and the supernatural conquest of the Promised Land. The message of the New Testament rests on the miracles, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Even the teaching of the early apostles rests on claims of "sign" miracles that were seen by many witnesses.

Finally, the Bible shows amazing unity (7) in the way that the creation themes of Genesis are brought together in the judgment and re-creation themes of Revelation. There Christ the Creator is described as Christ the final Judge and Savior.

### THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE

It is this aspect of the Bible which constitutes its grand distinction from all collections of sacred writings--the so-called "Bibles" of heathen religions--in the world. These, as the slightest inspection of them shows, have no unity. They are accumulations of [unrelated] materials, presenting, in their collection, no order, progress, or plan. The reason is that they embody no historical revelation working out a purpose in consecutive stages from germinal beginnings to perfect close.

The Bible, by contrast, is a single book because it embodies such revelation and exhibits such purpose. The unity of the book made up of so many parts is attestation of the reality of the revelation it contains (*International Standard Bible*

*Encyclopedia, pp. 467-8).*

In this light, let's ask some other questions. Are the apparent contradictions of Scripture clear or specific enough, and do they carry enough weight to dismiss this evidence of unity? Is it even possible that the varying perspectives and alleged discrepancies actually lend credibility rather than suspicion to the authors?



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## HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH THIS?

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Are we willing to approach it the same way we approach other matters? Are we willing to give the Bible the kind of consideration we would want for ourselves?

- Would we want to be quoted out of context?
- Would we want a chance to speak for ourselves?
- Would we want to be given the benefit of the doubt after giving others adequate reason to trust us?
- Would we want to be accused of contradicting ourselves by someone who had not tried to understand what we were saying?

**It is duty of the Christian scholar to look difficulties and objections squarely in the face. Nothing is to be gained by overlooking, evading, or shrinking from them.**

**--John Haley**

With these questions in mind, we're going to suggest that most of the apparent contradictions of the Bible can be resolved by (1) studying them in context, (2) letting the text speak for itself, and (3) discovering that the contrasting ideas are just that--contrasts, not contradictions.



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## WHAT ARE STUDIES IN CONTRASTS?

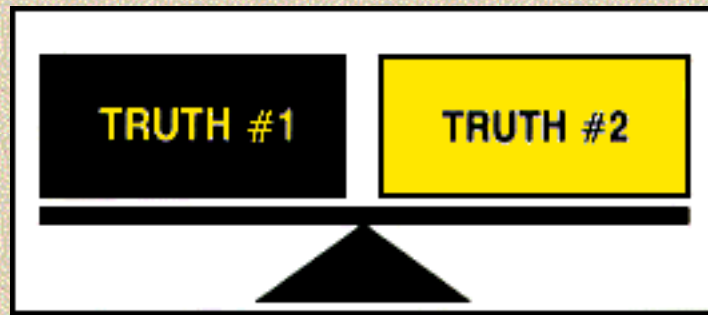
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A study in contrasts looks at an alleged discrepancy in the Bible and shows that the problem may be nothing more than two sides of the same truth. The solution, in turn, is to see that each side has its appropriate, God-given time and place. Such a solution is modeled in the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 when he wrote:

"To everything there is a season,  
A time for every purpose under heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die;  
A time to plant, and a time to pluck . . . ;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones,  
And a time to gather stones;  
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain . . . ;  
A time to gain, and a time to lose;  
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
A time to tear, and a time to sew;  
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time of war, and a time of peace."

This series of unrelenting contrasts overwhelmed Solomon. But it also brought him to a place of solution as he realized that opposites can be harmonized in the perfect design and plan of God. With this insight, Solomon declared, "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11).

In the following pages we will illustrate how the contrasting ideas of Scripture can be seen in their proper "time and place." We'll also use the diagram below to show how complementing truths work together to form balanced completeness.



This sense of balance is important because the question of whether the Bible contradicts itself goes beyond the issue of the Bible's credibility. Once that is established, we can gain a more mature understanding of the Bible's message by seeing the bigger and broader perspective on many issues. Most important, this growing sense of completeness can also help us to know and trust the Lord, who is both predictable and unpredictable, loving and hating, one in three, self-revealing and self-concealing, gentle and angry, God and man.



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# DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT GOD?

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Let's take a look at three apparent contradictions about God that have been the source of so much disagreement and confusion.



## WE SHOULD FEAR GOD

1. When people in the Bible came face to face with God, they reacted with fear. They either hid their faces, cried out in terror, or lost their strength and fell to the ground (Exodus 3:2-6; 1 Kings 19:13; Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:26--2:2; Revelation 1:17).
2. God is said to approve of such trembling--not only in response to Himself but also in response to His Word (Isaiah 66:1-2; Jeremiah 5:22).
3. "Fear and trembling" is said by Paul to be an essential characteristic of the Christian life (Philippians 2:12).
4. Such an attitude seems to be appropriate in light of the fact that God reserves the right to take away the health or even the life of a sinning Christian (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:27-30; Hebrews 12:3-11).
5. The Bible says that a Christian who does not take the Lord seriously enough will suffer loss in the life to come (1 Corinthians 3:11-17; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11; 1 John 2:28).

## WE SHOULD NOT FEAR GOD

1. God told people who were afraid of Him not to fear (Exodus 20:18-21; 1 Samuel 12:20; Revelation 1:17).
2. Paul told Timothy that God has not given us the spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7), and John wrote that the perfect love from God casts out fear (1 John 4:18).
3. The author of Hebrews encouraged Christians to come boldly to God for His help, even though it's undeserved (Hebrews 10:19-22).
4. The Bible gives us encouragement to run *to* God, not *away* from Him (James 4:8).

How can both be true? Is this double-talk? Test the following explanation: (a) When all passages are considered, it is apparent that both are true. (b) We should always be afraid of resisting or rebelling against God. (c) However, we should never be afraid of coming to Him on His terms and by His invitation. (d) The right kind of fear will drive us to the Lord, not away from Him. (e) Should God choose to reveal His power and glory to us, we can expect to find ourselves trembling on our faces before Him. (f) Paul's words to Timothy refer to the fact that we are not to fear *men*. (g) John is speaking of "perfect" (complete or mature) love, which characterizes those who are drawing near to the Lord rather than running from Him.



## **GOD IS IN CONTROL**

1. God showed an important king that He, the Lord, was in control of everyone and everything (Daniel 4:28-37).
2. God appoints the rulers of the world and uses them to carry out His purposes (Romans 13:1-7).
3. Sometimes even Satan acknowledges that God is in charge (Job 1).

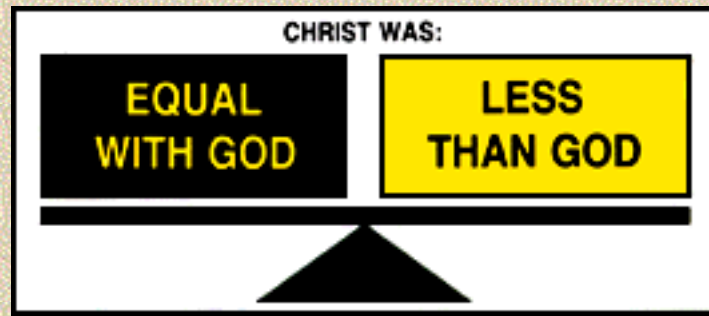
## **SATAN IS IN CONTROL**

1. Satan offered to give Christ "all the kingdoms of the world" if He would worship him (Matthew 4:8-9), indicating that Satan thought he was in control of those kingdoms (Luke 4:5-7).
2. Paul called Satan "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4).
3. John said that "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19).
4. The kind of evil that afflicts the world is said to originate from Satan, not the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Are these two sides contradictory? Can you see a way of joining them in contrasting balance? The answer is that (a) both are true. (b) Satan and his forces possess enormous influence over the world and even over the circumstances of the people of God. (c) Satan never has God's approval, yet he does nothing without God's permission. If Satan breathes, he takes a breath only as God allows. If Satan carries out his evil strategy, it is only because the Lord has a good reason for allowing him to do so.

While most of God's reasons for doing this are beyond our understanding, He has told us as much as we need to know to put Satan's presence to work for us. How can we do that? We can use the existence of "the god of this age" to show our allegiance to the one and true God. We can let the apparent "rule" of

evil give us occasion to show our trust in the Lord. We can let the turmoil of Satan's rebellion give us reason to show our hope in the One who will eventually bring Satan and his forces to submission and destruction. We can let his evil rule give us reason to love others in the way God has loved us.



Here we have another apparent contradiction that has generated endless controversy.

### **CHRIST WAS EQUAL WITH THE FATHER**

1. His claim to equality with the Father was so clear that the religious leaders wanted to stone Him for blasphemy (John 5:18; 10:30-39).
2. He referred to Himself as the "I Am," an Old Testament name for the "self-existent, eternal God." This self-reference once again caused His listeners to want to put an end to Him right then and there (John 8:58-59).
3. John called Him God (John 1:1).
4. He is called Creator of all things (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:10).
5. The Old Testament foresaw a coming Messiah who would be called "Everlasting Father" (Isaiah 9:6).

### **CHRIST WAS LESS THAN THE FATHER**

1. Jesus Himself declared that His Father was greater than He (John 14:28).
2. Paul described God as being the "head of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3).
3. Christ said that He could do nothing by Himself, thereby showing His dependence upon the Father (John 5:30).
4. Christ said that He alone had the right to judge men because that role was given to Him by the Father (John 5:22-23).
5. Christ said that He didn't know the day nor the hour of His return but that only the Father knew (Matthew 24:36).

So how can we make sense of these apparently contradictory positions? Again the solution lies in the awareness that (a) both are true. (b) As God, Christ was equal to the Father in His eternal essence and character. (c) However, when He left heaven on His mission of mercy, He temporarily laid aside His rights and honor in order to become the God-man. To become one of us, He left His glory behind and accepted a role of total dependence upon His Father. So fully did He identify with us that He actually

depended on the Holy Spirit when He did His miracles (Matthew 12:28). (d) Although He has once again been restored to honor and glory, His role as the God-man is not over. While being equal with God in essence, He still has accepted a subordinate role in order to carry out the eternal plan (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

Such a contrast might be difficult to comprehend. In fact, no one is able to understand how God became a man while still remaining God. But it is essential that we acquaint ourselves with both sides of such issues. If we don't have a balanced view of God, we will be vulnerable to mistakes and deception. Innumerable errors are made by those who see part of the truth and assume they know all that the Bible says on the subject.

## THINKING IT OVER

1. How do you show a proper fear of the Lord?
2. In what ways should you not be afraid of God?
3. Why do we tend to be afraid when we shouldn't be afraid, yet we do not fear God when we should?
4. How should you view the existence of trouble in your life? Can you tell whether it has come from Satan or from the Lord? In what four ways can you put that trouble to work for you?
5. What would you say to a cult member who points your attention to those parts of Scripture that show Christ to be less than God?



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# DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT SALVATION?

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Let's take a look at some ways the Scriptures seem to say two different things about salvation.



## WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

1. The New Testament writers repeatedly mentioned that faith in Christ is the only condition for salvation (John 1:12-13; 3:16; 5:24; 20:31; 1 Timothy 1:15-17).
2. The account of the thief on the cross illustrates salvation by faith alone. There was no opportunity for any other qualifying factor (Luke 23:39-43).
3. The historical account of Acts records people being saved on the condition of faith in Christ alone (Acts 8:26-40; 10:44-48; 16:30-31).
4. The apostle Paul developed carefully worded arguments designed to emphasize faith alone, apart from any meritorious work of human effort (Romans 4:1-5; Galatians 3:1-14, 26-29; Ephesians 2:8-10).

## WE ARE NOT SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

1. James boldly declared that we are not saved by faith alone (James 2:14-26).
2. Paul said to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).
3. Jesus told of those professing believers who would call Christ Lord and who would even go so far as to claim to do miracles in His name--yet not make it into the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:21).
4. The book of Acts seems to say that repentance and baptism are also necessary requirements for salvation (Acts 2:38).

So what do we do with this apparent conflict? The answer is that salvation is by faith alone. But true faith will not remain alone.

Baptism, for instance, when rightly used, is an important outward expression of faith. In the same way, repentance (literally a change of mind) also accompanies faith. But in both cases, it is the faith--not the

works, the ritual, nor the physical act--that qualifies a person for the kingdom of God.

The same is true of "confession." It is with the mouth that a person shows others his faith. But it is not by a person's mouth that he is saved (Romans 10:9-10).

For this reason, the thief on the cross could go directly to paradise. He had faith in the right Person and gave evidence of that faith by what he said.

James forcefully keeps us in balance. He reminds us that real faith always produces works, which in turn declare that we are right with God. His emphasis is in agreement with Paul, who told us to "work out" our salvation, not work *for* it.



## **SALVATION IS ONCE-FOR-ALL**

1. The New Testament indicates that like physical birth, salvation is an event, not just a process (John 3:3-12; 1 John 5:1).
2. Paul indicated that the event of salvation gives us a new position and condition before God (Romans 5:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. Paul made it clear that where there is a beginning in Christ, the end is as good as done (Romans 8:29-30; Philippians 1:6).
4. We are viewed by God as already "glorified" (Romans 8:30), as having "our citizenship . . . in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), as "translated . . . into the kingdom of the Son" (Colossians 1:13), and as "raised . . . together" and made to "sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).
5. Those who believe in Christ have the Holy Spirit living within. This not only enables us to live like children of God, but it also gives evidence that we are His people--destined for heaven (1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 4:30).

## **SALVATION IS CONTINUOUS**

1. Both Paul and Peter said that salvation is a future event (Romans 13:11; 1 Peter 1:5).
2. Paul talked about those who are "being saved," suggesting not just an event but a process (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15).
3. Paul spoke of a salvation that seemed to be dependent on the prayers of his readers (Philippians

1:19).

The solution to this contrast is found in the fact that salvation can be seen from several perspectives. God is able to save us from (a) the penalty of our sins, from (b) the power of sin, and eventually from (c) the presence of sin. The first is wrapped up in the *event* of the new birth (1 John 5:1). The second involves a *process* by which God repeatedly rescues His people from the power and unnecessary complications of sin (Philippians 1:19; 2:12). The third represents the ultimate *rescue* that occurs only when the child of God leaves this world for his heavenly home (1 Peter 1:5).



### **WE CAN COME TO GOD JUST AS WE ARE**

1. A tax collector, a member of an occupational group notorious for dishonesty, was accepted by God without first having to go out and change his ways (Luke 18:13-14).
2. The thief on the cross had no chance to clean up his life. He simply acknowledged his need of forgiveness (Luke 23:42-43).
3. Paul was suddenly confronted and accepted by God while in the process of persecuting the followers of Christ (Acts 9). He didn't have a chance to do anything except bow the knee just as he was.
4. The beggar who sat at a rich man's gate with rags on his back, sores on his body, and dogs for companions went directly to paradise when he died (Luke 16).

### **WE CAN'T COME TO GOD JUST AS WE ARE**

1. When the religious leaders of John's day came out to hear him, he called them a brood of snakes and told them to bring him evidence that they were ready to come to God (Luke 3:7-8).
2. Jesus told a rich young ruler that he should sell all that he had and distribute his money to the poor if he wanted to follow Him (Luke 18:22).
3. The Pharisee who went to the temple to offer a prayer of thanks walked away unaccepted and rejected by God (Luke 18:11,14).

What's the story? This sounds like double-talk, doesn't it? Yet there is no contradiction--only two sides of a single truth. The fact is that we can come to God just as we are, as long as we come in true humility and with a sense of genuine need. We don't have to break our bad habits, clean up our act, or improve our reputation before we can be accepted by God. On the contrary, all we have to do is give up any hope of

deserving His favor and throw ourselves on His mercy.

On the other hand, God will never accept us just as we are if we come to Him with an attitude of pride and self-sufficiency. He will never accept us until we humbly call on Him for help.

That's not a contradiction. It's one of the most wonderfully consistent truths imaginable. It's absolutely consistent with God's promise to accept anyone who comes to Him in true humility and need.

## THINKING IT OVER

1. What evidence is there in your life that you are depending on a salvation that is by faith in Christ alone?
2. Give several Scripture references to show that salvation is the result of trusting what Christ has done for us rather than what we have done for Him.
3. What do you think a friend or fellow worker would say if you asked him whether he thought your faith was real?
4. What would you say to someone who claims that the Bible contradicts itself by describing salvation as both an event and a process?
5. What evidence is there that you are making progress in the "process" of your salvation?
6. How are you showing your hope in the aspect of complete salvation that is yet future?
7. What does it mean to come to God "just as we are"?
8. What would you say to someone who assumes that he can come to Christ without making any changes in his life?
9. Make a list of any other aspects of salvation that seem on the surface to be contradictory and work at resolving them.

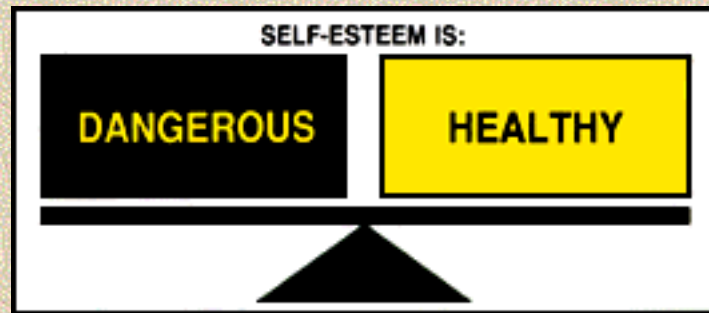


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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT CHRISTIAN LIVING?

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When it comes to the subject of Christian living, there are a number of biblical contrasts that on the surface appear to be contradictory. Let's consider three examples.



### SELF-ESTEEM IS DANGEROUS

1. According to the New Testament, Christians should be humble and willing to think of others more highly than themselves (Philippians 2:3).
2. A religious leader who thought well of himself was rejected by God (Luke 18:9-14).
3. A Christian should be meek in character (Matthew 5:5).
4. Christians are encouraged to see themselves as being helplessly incapable of doing any good on their own (John 5:30; Romans 7).
5. James, Peter, and Paul all warned about the danger of thinking too highly of oneself (Romans 12:3; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

### SELF-ESTEEM IS HEALTHY

1. The apostle Paul said that he could do anything God wanted him to do (Philippians 4:13).
2. New Testament Christians are repeatedly reminded to take courage in light of their exalted position and future in Christ (Ephesians 1:1-14).
3. The apostle Paul seemed to have such a healthy view of himself that he encouraged others to imitate him, even as he followed Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Is there a contradiction here? Not when you see how beautifully and consistently all of these statements fit together when studied in their individual contexts. The whole truth is that self-esteem is dangerous when associated with self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-righteousness. It is healthy when based on a thankful, confident recognition of what God thinks of us, what God has done for us, and what God can enable us to be and do (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Self-esteem is wrong when it results in thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think (Romans 12:3; 3 John 9). It is right when we estimate our worth and significance on the basis of what God thinks of us (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Self-esteem is wrong when we estimate our worth by measuring ourselves by ourselves, or by comparing ourselves among ourselves (Luke 18:9-14; 2 Corinthians 10:12). It is right when we estimate our worth on the basis of what God has done for us (Romans 12:3-8; 2 Corinthians 10:13).

Self-esteem is wrong when it leads us to conclude that we are deserving of God's kindness (Luke 18:11-12; James 4:6). It is right when we realize that by God's undeserved kindness we are members of the royal family, priests, kings, and no less than children of the mighty God (Romans 8:12-39).

Self-esteem is wrong when we do not give others more honor and consideration than ourselves (Philippians 2:3), when we think we can live successfully in our own strength (John 5:30), when we act as though we have not received our abilities and resources as gifts from God (1 Corinthians 4:6-7), or when we think of ourselves as being above hardship and suffering (Philippians 1:29).



### **WITH FAITH WE CAN DO ANYTHING**

1. Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains (Matthew 17:20).
2. The Lord said that if we ask anything in His name, it will be given to us (John 15:7,16).
3. The apostle John said that it was possible to get from God what we ask (1 John 3:21-22).
4. The apostle Paul was convinced that by God's grace he was able to handle any circumstance that came his way (Philippians 4:10-13).

### **WITH FAITH WE CAN'T DO EVERYTHING**

1. Although Jesus had perfect faith and asked for deliverance from the sufferings of the cross (Matthew 26:39), He had to endure the agony that caused Him to cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).
2. Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh, but he experienced the sufficiency of God's grace instead of the deliverance he asked for (2 Corinthians 12:1-10).
3. Paul suggested that Timothy drink some wine as medicine for his physical problems--something he would not have prescribed if a simple request for sound health would have brought healing (1

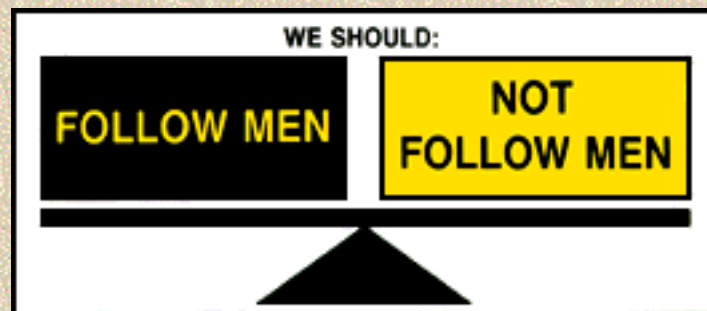
Timothy 5:23).

4. Stephen was stoned to death, James was killed with a sword, and all of the apostles endured persecution and imprisonment. They undoubtedly would have avoided these things if they could have been delivered from them through prayer (see Hebrews 11:36-40).
5. Although the apostle Paul expected that God would answer the prayers of His people and deliver him from prison, he expressed his confidence that even if he died it would be for God's glory (Philippians 1:19-26).

What is the answer then to this apparent inconsistency? It is that through faith we can do anything we want to do or receive anything we want to receive--as long as it is in harmony with God's will.

This answer will not satisfy those who have no desire to do the will of God. It won't make sense to someone who has little confidence in the goodness, wisdom, power, and love of God. But for those who find delight in knowing the Word of God and doing what the Lord wants them to do, this is a wonderfully consistent truth. They would no more expect God to give them everything they ask for than they would expect a human father to give his 3-year-old everything he asks for. People who seek God's will are confident that He will not withhold from them any good thing (Matthew 7:11).

The underlying assumption and spirit of all the great prayer promises is that we are praying under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in an attitude of submission to the will of God. Real faith trusts God for the impossible, but it doesn't desire anything that God doesn't want for us.



## **WE SHOULD FOLLOW MEN**

1. The apostle Paul asked his readers to follow (lit. imitate, mimic) him (1 Corinthians 11:1).
2. We have an obligation before God to follow, respect, and obey our leaders (Hebrews 13:7,17).
3. Peter taught us to follow the example of those mature Christian leaders whom God has placed over us (1 Peter 5:1-3).
4. We are to follow the example of godly people who have gone before us (Hebrews 11; James 5:11-18).

## **WE SHOULD NOT FOLLOW MEN**

1. Putting our confidence in men is futile (Psalm 108:12; 146:3-5).

2. Following a group of people can be just as dangerous as following an individual leader (Exodus 23:2).
3. Christ alone deserves our worship, love, and confidence (1 Corinthians 3:4-11).

This might seem to be contradictory advice. But it isn't. We need to see that following God means accepting the authority of those He places over us. Even at that, however, the leader is never the ultimate authority. For instance, wives are told to "submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:22). Servants are told to obey their masters "with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, *as to Christ*; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with good will doing service, *as to the Lord*, and not to men" (Ephesians 6:5-7). In other words, those who follow a leader properly are not really doing it to follow a man. They are serving and following Christ. In this way we can see that both sides are true.

## THINKING IT OVER

1. Do you have as much self-esteem as you should have? Do you think others recognize that you have a confidence that comes from the Lord?
2. What do you think you could ask the Lord for and be confident that He would be pleased to answer? How can you tell the difference between faith and presumption?
3. How would you assess your relationship to human leaders in light of what we have seen? What is the right motive for following a human leader? What is the wrong motive?



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## DO CONTRASTS EXPLAIN EVERYTHING?

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Studies in contrasts, as important as they are, are just one way of looking at the issues of apparent contradictions in the Bible. In his classic book *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, John W. Haley points out that the alleged discrepancies of the Bible are the result of many factors. The following list is adapted from his book:

- 1. Differences of time.** Conditions true at one time may not be true at another. For example, in the Old Testament, God promised His people physical prosperity if they would remain faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 28--30). But in the New Testament, the emphasis of blessing shifts from earth to heaven. God now promises the church that He will reward their obedience in eternity (Romans 8:18-25).
- 2. Differences of authorship.** Statements made by men speaking in behalf of God often conflict with statements made by men speaking only in their own behalf. For example, in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon said things out of the bitterness of his own heart that conflict with eternal truths spoken by others who said their words were from God.
- 3. Differences of perspective.** "Truth is many-sided, flinging back from each of its countless facets a ray of different hue" (Haley). If that sounds rather heady, consider the different descriptions of an elephant given by four blind men of different heights who had approached the animal from different directions.
- 4. Differences of arrangement.** Certain biblical passages may appear to conflict with one another if one author arranges his content chronologically while another author uses a topical arrangement.
- 5. Differences of computation.** Numbers will sometimes differ when the kind of calendar or standard of measure used are different.
- 6. Differences of language.** Eastern language and thought may be misinterpreted and seen as contradictory by a Western mind not acquainted with oriental custom, setting, and style. Eastern language tends to be poetic and rich with emotions and metaphors that must be properly understood or they will appear to be in conflict. For example, in one passage David described God as a rock, but in another place he described God as One who had wings and feathers.

The gestion of discrepancies is a question of interpretation, and it could hardly be expected that any two persons would always agree in their method of reconciling statements which seem to be [contradictory].

--Alvah Hovey

**7. Differences of names.** Eastern custom allowed for giving the same person different names. For instance, one of the apostles was referred to as: Simon, Simeon, Peter, Cephas, Simon Peter, Simon Bar-Jona, and Simon son of Jonas. Frequently, the names of persons and places were changed after an important event.

**8. Differences of word meanings.** The same word might mean entirely different things depending on the context or usage. Try to imagine the initial confusion of an international traveler who is unfamiliar with the way Americans use the terms *hot*, *cool*, *sharp*, or *awesome*.

**9. Differences of manuscripts.** A certain percentage of discrepancies are due to errors that have crept into the copying process. We can be thankful that these doubtful passages do not involve more than a small percentage of the total text, and none of them threatens any essential doctrine or truth.

**10. Differences of author and reader.** Many alleged discrepancies are due to the imagination of the critic who is more interested in finding problems than in finding solutions.

If this seems to raise an excessive number of problems, keep in mind that science, law, history, and medicine are full of situations where conflicting information exists. Yet seldom does anyone toss up his hands and assume that there are no answers just because answers have not yet been found.



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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT US?

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This might be the most important question of all. Is it possible that the real issue is that we know down deep that the Bible contradicts us? Is it possible that we're critical of the best book in the world because we don't want to be captured by its wisdom? Is it possible that an otherwise objective person might have lost some objectivity along the way?

The fact is that when the Bible contradicts us, calls us wrong, and points us to Christ, it is only to bring us the good news that He loves us, died for us, and rose from the dead to show that our rescue is possible.

**Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them.**

**--E. Paul Hovey**

That being the case, let's not contradict ourselves and our own chances for forgiveness, life, and happiness.

Let's not contradict God by acting as though we can escape hell without His help. Let's instead agree with Him and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved (Acts 16:31). Only then will we resolve the one contradiction that is as real as it seems to be.



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## STUDIES IN CONTRASTS



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## STUDIES IN CONTRASTS

An old rumor has it that "the good book" is a library of contradictions. It is said by some that the real genius of this bestseller is that, like other successful "fortune tellers," it covers its predictions with enough broad, obscure, and contradictory statements to be able to hide in the tangle.

But is that really the truth about the Bible? Or is there some way to resolve its alleged contradictions? We offer the following pages to you with the confidence that the more of the Bible you understand, the less you will wonder about its overall unity, consistency, and reliability.

*Martin R. De Haan II*, President of RBC Ministries

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## **DOUBLE-TALK**

Does the Bible contradict itself?

"Yes," responds the well-groomed businessman. "The way it looks to me, the Bible does contradict itself. I think it is riddled with inconsistencies."

"Show me one," says a second-year college student, counting on a sophomoric bet that the critic hasn't done his homework.

"I can't think of a specific," says the self-appointed authority, "but I know they're there."

"I can," says another. "In some places the Bible says God loves everybody. In other places it says there are some people He hates. And sometimes the biblical authors contradict themselves before the ink has had a chance to dry on their first statement. For instance, within the space of two sentences the author of Proverbs says that a wise man will and will not try to answer a fool (26:4-5). What kind of sense does that make?"

"A lot of sense," says a little old man with baggy pants and a grey-white shirt marked by a mustard stain on the pen-laden left pocket. "The Bible only seems to contradict itself to those who don't understand it."

"Sir, with all due respect," the other responds, "the Bible makes sense only because you want it to make sense."

"And is it possible that you'd rather it didn't make sense?" replies the old man. "Does your live-in girlfriend and your life-risking wager that this life is all you need to worry about make you a good judge of the Book that judges you?"

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## **WHAT'S AT STAKE?**

Is the issue of double-talk important? It is if your employer promises you he's going to give you a raise and then a few days later tells you that he was only thinking about it. It's important if a politician is caught talking out of both sides of his mouth, or if a teacher sends mixed signals about what you can expect on the final exam. It's serious if you rent from a landlord who keeps changing his story about whether he's going to raise your rent.

It's even more serious if the Bible gives you mixed signals about what God thinks of you. It is absolutely essential for you to know whether you can trust this Book.

**If the Bible contradicts itself, how can we believe what it says about us, about God, or about anything else?**

Does God really know every thought that is in our mind? (Psalm 139:1-6). Does He care about what happens to us? (Matthew 6:25-34). Is He willing to forgive the worst of our sins? (1 Corinthians 6:11). All of these things are in doubt if the Bible is a book of double-talk and self-contradiction.

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## **WHERE ARE THE CONTRADICTIONS?**

It's important for our theory to fit the facts of the case before us. On this question, the fact is that the Bible does appear to contradict itself. (1) It appears that way to the unbelieving critic. (2) It appears that way to the Christian who works hard to harmonize those passages of history, ethics, or prophecy that seem to be in conflict with one another. (3) It appears to the casual reader that the Bible is less than consistent. He's confused by the fact that the Bible says:

1. We should/should not be afraid of God.
2. God is in control/Satan is in control.
3. Christ was less than/equal with the Father.
4. We are/are not saved by faith alone.
5. Salvation is once-for-all/continuous.
6. We can/cannot come to God as we are.
7. Self-esteem is dangerous/healthy.
8. With faith we can/cannot do everything.
9. We should/should not follow men.

But does the fact that the Bible seems to contradict itself mean that it actually does? We can't afford to jump to a wrong conclusion. The issues are too important. Too much is at stake to casually dismiss a

book of the Bible's stature just because it appears at times to contradict itself. There is too much to be said for this Book that has inspired more faith, more hope, more love, more honesty, more hard work, more social reform, and more justice than any other book the world has ever known.

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## WHY AREN'T THERE MORE?

A look at a few other facts could easily cause us to ask a question different from the one proposed on the cover of this booklet. We could ask, "Why doesn't the Bible appear to contradict itself more often?"

**Seven Obstacles To Unity.** (1) The Bible was written over a period of 1,500 years, (2) in several different languages, (3) by 40 different authors (4) from many walks of life and (5) from several geographic locations in the Mideast. (6) These authors claim to speak in behalf of a God who describes our situation from His own infinite, eternal perspective. (7) Yet these authors also approach those same issues from the perspective of people caught up in the intense emotions, ecstasies, and agonies of human experience.

**Seven Evidences Of Unity.** In spite of these obstacles, the Bible shows amazing unity when it comes to describing (1) the personality and character of God, (2) the personality and character of man, (3) the human need for salvation, (4) the need for a substitutionary blood sacrifice to accomplish that salvation, and (5) the anticipation and coming of a promised Messiah-Savior described as "God with us." Beyond that, the Bible shows unity (6) in the way it uses public miracles and fulfilled prophecies to support its spiritual claims and authority. Its claims are not left to the philosophy, idealism, or good intentions of its authors. The message of the Old Testament was confirmed by events as physical as the Flood, the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, and the supernatural conquest of the Promised Land. The message of the New Testament rests on the miracles, life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. Even the teaching of the early apostles rests on claims of "sign" miracles that were seen by many witnesses.

Finally, the Bible shows amazing unity (7) in the way that the creation themes of Genesis are brought together in the judgment and re-creation themes of Revelation. There Christ the Creator is described as Christ the final Judge and Savior.

## THE UNITY OF THE BIBLE

It is this aspect of the Bible which constitutes its grand distinction from all collections of sacred writings--the so-called "Bibles" of heathen religions--in the world. These, as the slightest inspection of them shows, have no unity. They are accumulations of [unrelated] materials, presenting, in their collection, no order, progress, or plan. The reason is that they embody no historical revelation working out a purpose in consecutive stages from germinal beginnings to perfect close.

The Bible, by contrast, is a single book because it embodies such revelation and exhibits such purpose. The unity of the book made up of so many parts is attestation of the reality of the revelation it contains (*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 467-8).

In this light, let's ask some other questions. Are the apparent contradictions of Scripture clear or specific enough, and do they carry enough weight to dismiss this evidence of unity? Is it even possible that the varying perspectives and alleged discrepancies actually lend credibility rather than suspicion to the authors?

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## HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH THIS?

Are we willing to approach it the same way we approach other matters? Are we willing to give the Bible the kind of consideration we would want for ourselves?

- Would we want to be quoted out of context?
- Would we want a chance to speak for ourselves?
- Would we want to be given the benefit of the doubt after giving others adequate reason to trust us?
- Would we want to be accused of contradicting ourselves by someone who had not tried to understand what we were saying?

**It is duty of the Christian scholar to look difficulties and objections squarely in the face. Nothing is to be gained by overlooking, evading, or shrinking from them.**

**--John Haley**

With these questions in mind, we're going to suggest that most of the apparent contradictions of the Bible

can be resolved by (1) studying them in context, (2) letting the text speak for itself, and (3) discovering that the contrasting ideas are just that--contrasts, not contradictions.

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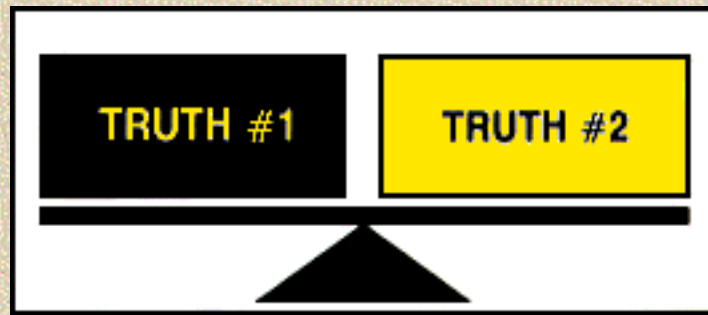
## WHAT ARE STUDIES IN CONTRASTS?

A study in contrasts looks at an alleged discrepancy in the Bible and shows that the problem may be nothing more than two sides of the same truth. The solution, in turn, is to see that each side has its appropriate, God-given time and place. Such a solution is modeled in the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 when he wrote:

"To everything there is a season,  
A time for every purpose under heaven:  
A time to be born, and a time to die;  
A time to plant, and a time to pluck . . . ;  
A time to kill, and a time to heal;  
A time to break down, and a time to build up;  
A time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
A time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
A time to cast away stones,  
And a time to gather stones;  
A time to embrace, and a time to refrain . . . ;  
A time to gain, and a time to lose;  
A time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
A time to tear, and a time to sew;  
A time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
A time to love, and a time to hate;  
A time of war, and a time of peace."

This series of unrelenting contrasts overwhelmed Solomon. But it also brought him to a place of solution as he realized that opposites can be harmonized in the perfect design and plan of God. With this insight, Solomon declared, "[God] has made everything beautiful in its time" (3:11).

In the following pages we will illustrate how the contrasting ideas of Scripture can be seen in their proper "time and place." We'll also use the diagram below to show how complementing truths work together to form balanced completeness.



This sense of balance is important because the question of whether the Bible contradicts itself goes beyond the issue of the Bible's credibility. Once that is established, we can gain a more mature understanding of the Bible's message by seeing the bigger and broader perspective on many issues. Most important, this growing sense of completeness can also help us to know and trust the Lord, who is both predictable and unpredictable, loving and hating, one in three, self-revealing and self-concealing, gentle and angry, God and man.

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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT GOD?

Let's take a look at three apparent contradictions about God that have been the source of so much disagreement and confusion.



### WE SHOULD FEAR GOD

1. When people in the Bible came face to face with God, they reacted with fear. They either hid their faces, cried out in terror, or lost their strength and fell to the ground (Exodus 3:2-6; 1 Kings 19:13; Isaiah 6:5; Ezekiel 1:26--2:2; Revelation 1:17).
2. God is said to approve of such trembling--not only in response to Himself but also in response to His Word (Isaiah 66:1-2; Jeremiah 5:22).

3. "Fear and trembling" is said by Paul to be an essential characteristic of the Christian life (Philippians 2:12).
4. Such an attitude seems to be appropriate in light of the fact that God reserves the right to take away the health or even the life of a sinning Christian (Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 11:27-30; Hebrews 12:3-11).
5. The Bible says that a Christian who does not take the Lord seriously enough will suffer loss in the life to come (1 Corinthians 3:11-17; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11; 1 John 2:28).

## WE SHOULD NOT FEAR GOD

1. God told people who were afraid of Him not to fear (Exodus 20:18-21; 1 Samuel 12:20; Revelation 1:17).
2. Paul told Timothy that God has not given us the spirit of fear (2 Timothy 1:7), and John wrote that the perfect love from God casts out fear (1 John 4:18).
3. The author of Hebrews encouraged Christians to come boldly to God for His help, even though it's undeserved (Hebrews 10:19-22).
4. The Bible gives us encouragement to run *to* God, not *away* from Him (James 4:8).

How can both be true? Is this double-talk? Test the following explanation: (a) When all passages are considered, it is apparent that both are true. (b) We should always be afraid of resisting or rebelling against God. (c) However, we should never be afraid of coming to Him on His terms and by His invitation. (d) The right kind of fear will drive us to the Lord, not away from Him. (e) Should God choose to reveal His power and glory to us, we can expect to find ourselves trembling on our faces before Him. (f) Paul's words to Timothy refer to the fact that we are not to fear *men*. (g) John is speaking of "perfect" (complete or mature) love, which characterizes those who are drawing near to the Lord rather than running from Him.



## GOD IS IN CONTROL

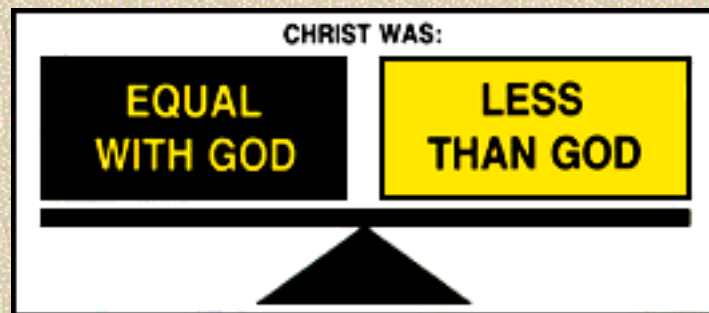
1. God showed an important king that He, the Lord, was in control of everyone and everything (Daniel 4:28-37).
2. God appoints the rulers of the world and uses them to carry out His purposes (Romans 13:1-7).
3. Sometimes even Satan acknowledges that God is in charge (Job 1).

## SATAN IS IN CONTROL

1. Satan offered to give Christ "all the kingdoms of the world" if He would worship him (Matthew 4:8-9), indicating that Satan thought he was in control of those kingdoms (Luke 4:5-7).
2. Paul called Satan "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4).
3. John said that "the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one" (1 John 5:19).
4. The kind of evil that afflicts the world is said to originate from Satan, not the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:7).

Are these two sides contradictory? Can you see a way of joining them in contrasting balance? The answer is that (a) both are true. (b) Satan and his forces possess enormous influence over the world and even over the circumstances of the people of God. (c) Satan never has God's approval, yet he does nothing without God's permission. If Satan breathes, he takes a breath only as God allows. If Satan carries out his evil strategy, it is only because the Lord has a good reason for allowing him to do so.

While most of God's reasons for doing this are beyond our understanding, He has told us as much as we need to know to put Satan's presence to work for us. How can we do that? We can use the existence of "the god of this age" to show our allegiance to the one and true God. We can let the apparent "rule" of evil give us occasion to show our trust in the Lord. We can let the turmoil of Satan's rebellion give us reason to show our hope in the One who will eventually bring Satan and his forces to submission and destruction. We can let his evil rule give us reason to love others in the way God has loved us.



Here we have another apparent contradiction that has generated endless controversy.

## CHRIST WAS EQUAL WITH THE FATHER

1. His claim to equality with the Father was so clear that the religious leaders wanted to stone Him for blasphemy (John 5:18; 10:30-39).
2. He referred to Himself as the "I Am," an Old Testament name for the "self-existent, eternal God." This self-reference once again caused His listeners to want to put an end to Him right then and there (John 8:58-59).
3. John called Him God (John 1:1).
4. He is called Creator of all things (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:10).
5. The Old Testament foresaw a coming Messiah who would be called "Everlasting Father" (Isaiah

9:6).

## **CHRIST WAS LESS THAN THE FATHER**

1. Jesus Himself declared that His Father was greater than He (John 14:28).
2. Paul described God as being the "head of Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:3).
3. Christ said that He could do nothing by Himself, thereby showing His dependence upon the Father (John 5:30).
4. Christ said that He alone had the right to judge men because that role was given to Him by the Father (John 5:22-23).
5. Christ said that He didn't know the day nor the hour of His return but that only the Father knew (Matthew 24:36).

So how can we make sense of these apparently contradictory positions? Again the solution lies in the awareness that (a) both are true. (b) As God, Christ was equal to the Father in His eternal essence and character. (c) However, when He left heaven on His mission of mercy, He temporarily laid aside His rights and honor in order to become the God-man. To become one of us, He left His glory behind and accepted a role of total dependence upon His Father. So fully did He identify with us that He actually depended on the Holy Spirit when He did His miracles (Matthew 12:28). (d) Although He has once again been restored to honor and glory, His role as the God-man is not over. While being equal with God in essence, He still has accepted a subordinate role in order to carry out the eternal plan (1 Corinthians 15:20-28).

Such a contrast might be difficult to comprehend. In fact, no one is able to understand how God became a man while still remaining God. But it is essential that we acquaint ourselves with both sides of such issues. If we don't have a balanced view of God, we will be vulnerable to mistakes and deception. Innumerable errors are made by those who see part of the truth and assume they know all that the Bible says on the subject.

## **THINKING IT OVER**

1. How do you show a proper fear of the Lord?
2. In what ways should you not be afraid of God?
3. Why do we tend to be afraid when we shouldn't be afraid, yet we do not fear God when we should?
4. How should you view the existence of trouble in your life? Can you tell whether it has come from Satan or from the Lord? In what four ways can you put that trouble to work for you?
5. What would you say to a cult member who points your attention to those parts of Scripture that show Christ to be less than God?

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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT SALVATION?

Let's take a look at some ways the Scriptures seem to say two different things about salvation.



### WE ARE SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

1. The New Testament writers repeatedly mentioned that faith in Christ is the only condition for salvation (John 1:12-13; 3:16; 5:24; 20:31; 1 Timothy 1:15-17).
2. The account of the thief on the cross illustrates salvation by faith alone. There was no opportunity for any other qualifying factor (Luke 23:39-43).
3. The historical account of Acts records people being saved on the condition of faith in Christ alone (Acts 8:26-40; 10:44-48; 16:30-31).
4. The apostle Paul developed carefully worded arguments designed to emphasize faith alone, apart from any meritorious work of human effort (Romans 4:1-5; Galatians 3:1-14, 26-29; Ephesians 2:8-10).

### WE ARE NOT SAVED BY FAITH ALONE

1. James boldly declared that we are not saved by faith alone (James 2:14-26).
2. Paul said to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).
3. Jesus told of those professing believers who would call Christ Lord and who would even go so far as to claim to do miracles in His name--yet not make it into the kingdom of God (Matthew 7:21).
4. The book of Acts seems to say that repentance and baptism are also necessary requirements for salvation (Acts 2:38).

So what do we do with this apparent conflict? The answer is that salvation is by faith alone. But true faith will not remain alone.

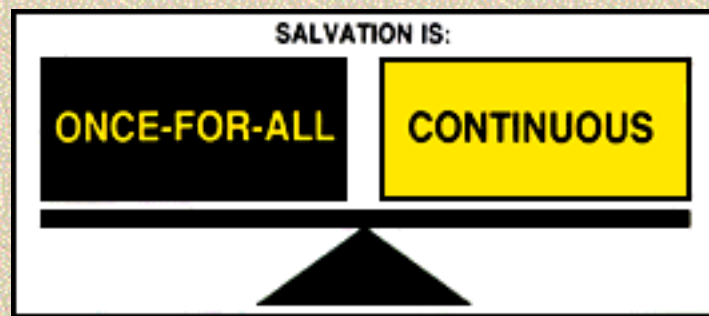
Baptism, for instance, when rightly used, is an important outward expression of faith. In the same way,

repentance (literally a change of mind) also accompanies faith. But in both cases, it is the faith--not the works, the ritual, nor the physical act--that qualifies a person for the kingdom of God.

The same is true of "confession." It is with the mouth that a person shows others his faith. But it is not by a person's mouth that he is saved (Romans 10:9-10).

For this reason, the thief on the cross could go directly to paradise. He had faith in the right Person and gave evidence of that faith by what he said.

James forcefully keeps us in balance. He reminds us that real faith always produces works, which in turn declare that we are right with God. His emphasis is in agreement with Paul, who told us to "work out" our salvation, not work *for* it.



## **SALVATION IS ONCE-FOR-ALL**

1. The New Testament indicates that like physical birth, salvation is an event, not just a process (John 3:3-12; 1 John 5:1).
2. Paul indicated that the event of salvation gives us a new position and condition before God (Romans 5:1-2; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
3. Paul made it clear that where there is a beginning in Christ, the end is as good as done (Romans 8:29-30; Philippians 1:6).
4. We are viewed by God as already "glorified" (Romans 8:30), as having "our citizenship . . . in heaven" (Philippians 3:20), as "translated . . . into the kingdom of the Son" (Colossians 1:13), and as "raised . . . together" and made to "sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).
5. Those who believe in Christ have the Holy Spirit living within. This not only enables us to live like children of God, but it also gives evidence that we are His people--destined for heaven (1 Corinthians 6:19; Ephesians 4:30).

## **SALVATION IS CONTINUOUS**

1. Both Paul and Peter said that salvation is a future event (Romans 13:11; 1 Peter 1:5).
2. Paul talked about those who are "being saved," suggesting not just an event but a process (1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 2:15).

- Paul spoke of a salvation that seemed to be dependent on the prayers of his readers (Philippians 1:19).

The solution to this contrast is found in the fact that salvation can be seen from several perspectives. God is able to save us from (a) the penalty of our sins, from (b) the power of sin, and eventually from (c) the presence of sin. The first is wrapped up in the *event* of the new birth (1 John 5:1). The second involves a *process* by which God repeatedly rescues His people from the power and unnecessary complications of sin (Philippians 1:19; 2:12). The third represents the ultimate *rescue* that occurs only when the child of God leaves this world for his heavenly home (1 Peter 1:5).



### **WE CAN COME TO GOD JUST AS WE ARE**

- A tax collector, a member of an occupational group notorious for dishonesty, was accepted by God without first having to go out and change his ways (Luke 18:13-14).
- The thief on the cross had no chance to clean up his life. He simply acknowledged his need of forgiveness (Luke 23:42-43).
- Paul was suddenly confronted and accepted by God while in the process of persecuting the followers of Christ (Acts 9). He didn't have a chance to do anything except bow the knee just as he was.
- The beggar who sat at a rich man's gate with rags on his back, sores on his body, and dogs for companions went directly to paradise when he died (Luke 16).

### **WE CAN'T COME TO GOD JUST AS WE ARE**

- When the religious leaders of John's day came out to hear him, he called them a brood of snakes and told them to bring him evidence that they were ready to come to God (Luke 3:7-8).
- Jesus told a rich young ruler that he should sell all that he had and distribute his money to the poor if he wanted to follow Him (Luke 18:22).
- The Pharisee who went to the temple to offer a prayer of thanks walked away unaccepted and rejected by God (Luke 18:11,14).

What's the story? This sounds like double-talk, doesn't it? Yet there is no contradiction--only two sides of a single truth. The fact is that we can come to God just as we are, as long as we come in true humility and with a sense of genuine need. We don't have to break our bad habits, clean up our act, or improve our

reputation before we can be accepted by God. On the contrary, all we have to do is give up any hope of deserving His favor and throw ourselves on His mercy.

On the other hand, God will never accept us just as we are if we come to Him with an attitude of pride and self-sufficiency. He will never accept us until we humbly call on Him for help.

That's not a contradiction. It's one of the most wonderfully consistent truths imaginable. It's absolutely consistent with God's promise to accept anyone who comes to Him in true humility and need.

## THINKING IT OVER

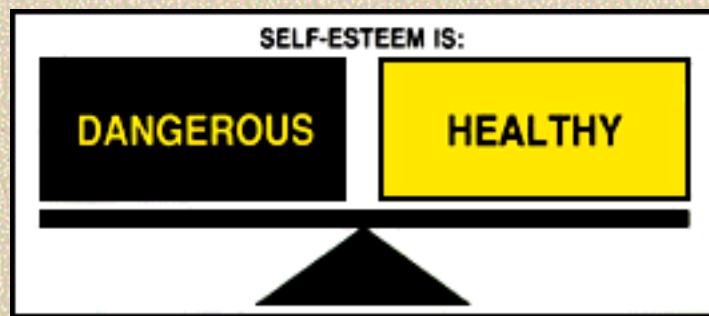
1. What evidence is there in your life that you are depending on a salvation that is by faith in Christ alone?
2. Give several Scripture references to show that salvation is the result of trusting what Christ has done for us rather than what we have done for Him.
3. What do you think a friend or fellow worker would say if you asked him whether he thought your faith was real?
4. What would you say to someone who claims that the Bible contradicts itself by describing salvation as both an event and a process?
5. What evidence is there that you are making progress in the "process" of your salvation?
6. How are you showing your hope in the aspect of complete salvation that is yet future?
7. What does it mean to come to God "just as we are"?
8. What would you say to someone who assumes that he can come to Christ without making any changes in his life?
9. Make a list of any other aspects of salvation that seem on the surface to be contradictory and work at resolving them.

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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT ITSELF ABOUT CHRISTIAN LIVING?

When it comes to the subject of Christian living, there are a number of biblical contrasts that on the surface appear to be contradictory. Let's consider three examples.



## **SELF-ESTEEM IS DANGEROUS**

1. According to the New Testament, Christians should be humble and willing to think of others more highly than themselves (Philippians 2:3).
2. A religious leader who thought well of himself was rejected by God (Luke 18:9-14).
3. A Christian should be meek in character (Matthew 5:5).
4. Christians are encouraged to see themselves as being helplessly incapable of doing any good on their own (John 5:30; Romans 7).
5. James, Peter, and Paul all warned about the danger of thinking too highly of oneself (Romans 12:3; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

## **SELF-ESTEEM IS HEALTHY**

1. The apostle Paul said that he could do anything God wanted him to do (Philippians 4:13).
2. New Testament Christians are repeatedly reminded to take courage in light of their exalted position and future in Christ (Ephesians 1:1-14).
3. The apostle Paul seemed to have such a healthy view of himself that he encouraged others to imitate him, even as he followed Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Is there a contradiction here? Not when you see how beautifully and consistently all of these statements fit together when studied in their individual contexts. The whole truth is that self-esteem is dangerous when associated with self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and self-righteousness. It is healthy when based on a thankful, confident recognition of what God thinks of us, what God has done for us, and what God can enable us to be and do (2 Corinthians 3:5).

Self-esteem is wrong when it results in thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think (Romans 12:3; 3 John 9). It is right when we estimate our worth and significance on the basis of what God thinks of us (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Self-esteem is wrong when we estimate our worth by measuring ourselves by ourselves, or by comparing ourselves among ourselves (Luke 18:9-14; 2 Corinthians 10:12). It is right when we estimate our worth on the basis of what God has done for us (Romans 12:3-8; 2 Corinthians 10:13).

Self-esteem is wrong when it leads us to conclude that we are deserving of God's kindness (Luke 18:11-

12; James 4:6). It is right when we realize that by God's undeserved kindness we are members of the royal family, priests, kings, and no less than children of the mighty God (Romans 8:12-39).

Self-esteem is wrong when we do not give others more honor and consideration than ourselves (Philippians 2:3), when we think we can live successfully in our own strength (John 5:30), when we act as though we have not received our abilities and resources as gifts from God (1 Corinthians 4:6-7), or when we think of ourselves as being above hardship and suffering (Philippians 1:29).



### **WITH FAITH WE CAN DO ANYTHING**

1. Jesus said that faith as small as a mustard seed can move mountains (Matthew 17:20).
2. The Lord said that if we ask anything in His name, it will be given to us (John 15:7,16).
3. The apostle John said that it was possible to get from God what we ask (1 John 3:21-22).
4. The apostle Paul was convinced that by God's grace he was able to handle any circumstance that came his way (Philippians 4:10-13).

### **WITH FAITH WE CAN'T DO EVERYTHING**

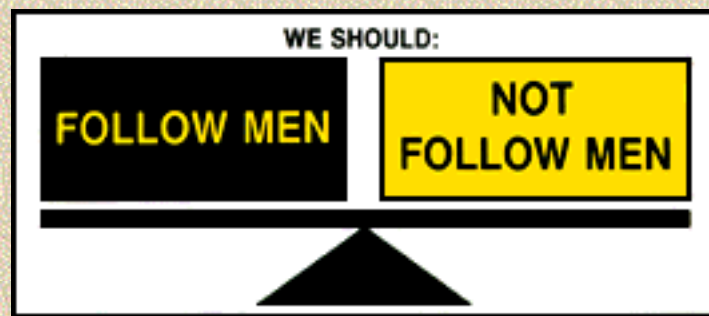
1. Although Jesus had perfect faith and asked for deliverance from the sufferings of the cross (Matthew 26:39), He had to endure the agony that caused Him to cry, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46).
2. Paul asked God to remove his thorn in the flesh, but he experienced the sufficiency of God's grace instead of the deliverance he asked for (2 Corinthians 12:1-10).
3. Paul suggested that Timothy drink some wine as medicine for his physical problems--something he would not have prescribed if a simple request for sound health would have brought healing (1 Timothy 5:23).
4. Stephen was stoned to death, James was killed with a sword, and all of the apostles endured persecution and imprisonment. They undoubtedly would have avoided these things if they could have been delivered from them through prayer (see Hebrews 11:36-40).
5. Although the apostle Paul expected that God would answer the prayers of His people and deliver him from prison, he expressed his confidence that even if he died it would be for God's glory (Philippians 1:19-26).

What is the answer then to this apparent inconsistency? It is that through faith we can do anything we

want to do or receive anything we want to receive--as long as it is in harmony with God's will.

This answer will not satisfy those who have no desire to do the will of God. It won't make sense to someone who has little confidence in the goodness, wisdom, power, and love of God. But for those who find delight in knowing the Word of God and doing what the Lord wants them to do, this is a wonderfully consistent truth. They would no more expect God to give them everything they ask for than they would expect a human father to give his 3-year-old everything he asks for. People who seek God's will are confident that He will not withhold from them any good thing (Matthew 7:11).

The underlying assumption and spirit of all the great prayer promises is that we are praying under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and in an attitude of submission to the will of God. Real faith trusts God for the impossible, but it doesn't desire anything that God doesn't want for us.



## **WE SHOULD FOLLOW MEN**

1. The apostle Paul asked his readers to follow (lit. imitate, mimic) him (1 Corinthians 11:1).
2. We have an obligation before God to follow, respect, and obey our leaders (Hebrews 13:7,17).
3. Peter taught us to follow the example of those mature Christian leaders whom God has placed over us (1 Peter 5:1-3).
4. We are to follow the example of godly people who have gone before us (Hebrews 11; James 5:11-18).

## **WE SHOULD NOT FOLLOW MEN**

1. Putting our confidence in men is futile (Psalm 108:12; 146:3-5).
2. Following a group of people can be just as dangerous as following an individual leader (Exodus 23:2).
3. Christ alone deserves our worship, love, and confidence (1 Corinthians 3:4-11).

This might seem to be contradictory advice. But it isn't. We need to see that following God means accepting the authority of those He places over us. Even at that, however, the leader is never the ultimate authority. For instance, wives are told to "submit to your own husbands, *as to the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:22). Servants are told to obey their masters "with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, *as to Christ*; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with

good will doing service, *as to the Lord*, and not to men" (Ephesians 6:5-7). In other words, those who follow a leader properly are not really doing it to follow a man. They are serving and following Christ. In this way we can see that both sides are true.

## THINKING IT OVER

1. Do you have as much self-esteem as you should have? Do you think others recognize that you have a confidence that comes from the Lord?
2. What do you think you could ask the Lord for and be confident that He would be pleased to answer? How can you tell the difference between faith and presumption?
3. How would you assess your relationship to human leaders in light of what we have seen? What is the right motive for following a human leader? What is the wrong motive?

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# DO CONTRASTS EXPLAIN EVERYTHING?

Studies in contrasts, as important as they are, are just one way of looking at the issues of apparent contradictions in the Bible. In his classic book *Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible*, John W. Haley points out that the alleged discrepancies of the Bible are the result of many factors. The following list is adapted from his book:

- 1. Differences of time.** Conditions true at one time may not be true at another. For example, in the Old Testament, God promised His people physical prosperity if they would remain faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 28--30). But in the New Testament, the emphasis of blessing shifts from earth to heaven. God now promises the church that He will reward their obedience in eternity (Romans 8:18-25).
- 2. Differences of authorship.** Statements made by men speaking in behalf of God often conflict with statements made by men speaking only in their own behalf. For example, in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon said things out of the bitterness of his own heart that conflict with eternal truths spoken by others who said their words were from God.
- 3. Differences of perspective.** "Truth is many-sided, flinging back from each of its countless facets a ray of different hue" (Haley). If that sounds rather heady, consider the different descriptions of an elephant given by four blind men of different heights who had approached the animal from different directions.

- 4. Differences of arrangement.** Certain biblical passages may appear to conflict with one another if one author arranges his content chronologically while another author uses a topical arrangement.
- 5. Differences of computation.** Numbers will sometimes differ when the kind of calendar or standard of measure used are different.
- 6. Differences of language.** Eastern language and thought may be misinterpreted and seen as contradictory by a Western mind not acquainted with oriental custom, setting, and style. Eastern language tends to be poetic and rich with emotions and metaphors that must be properly understood or they will appear to be in conflict. For example, in one passage David described God as a rock, but in another place he described God as One who had wings and feathers.
- 7. Differences of names.** Eastern custom allowed for giving the same person different names. For instance, one of the apostles was referred to as: Simon, Simeon, Peter, Cephas, Simon Peter, Simon Bar-Jona, and Simon son of Jonas. Frequently, the names of persons and places were changed after an important event.
- 8. Differences of word meanings.** The same word might mean entirely different things depending on the context or usage. Try to imagine the initial confusion of an international traveler who is unfamiliar with the way Americans use the terms *hot*, *cool*, *sharp*, or *awesome*.
- 9. Differences of manuscripts.** A certain percentage of discrepancies are due to errors that have crept into the copying process. We can be thankful that these doubtful passages do not involve more than a small percentage of the total text, and none of them threatens any essential doctrine or truth.
- 10. Differences of author and reader.** Many alleged discrepancies are due to the imagination of the critic who is more interested in finding problems than in finding solutions.

The question of discrepancies is a question of interpretation, and it could hardly be expected that any two persons would always agree in their method of reconciling statements which seem to be [contradictory].

--Alvah Hovey

If this seems to raise an excessive number of problems, keep in mind that science, law, history, and medicine are full of situations where conflicting information exists. Yet seldom does anyone toss up his hands and assume that there are no answers just because answers have not yet been found.

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## DOES THE BIBLE CONTRADICT US?

This might be the most important question of all. Is it possible that the real issue is that we know down deep that the Bible contradicts us? Is it possible that we're critical of the best book in the world because we don't want to be captured by its wisdom? Is it possible that an otherwise objective person might have lost some objectivity along the way?

The fact is that when the Bible contradicts us, calls us wrong, and points us to Christ, it is only to bring us the good news that He loves us, died for us, and rose from the dead to show that our rescue is possible.

**Men do not reject the Bible because it contradicts itself, but because it contradicts them.**

**--E. Paul Hovey**

That being the case, let's not contradict ourselves and our own chances for forgiveness, life, and happiness.

Let's not contradict God by acting as though we can escape hell without His help. Let's instead agree with Him and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved (Acts 16:31). Only then will we resolve the one contradiction that is as real as it seems to be.



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