

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

"Come As You Are ... Leave Changed!"

Burning Questions 02

What About ALL the Contradictions in the Bible?

Luke 1:1-4

Jan 15, 2017

Annual Congregational Meeting

Communion: Sheila Cragg

Care Calling: The Webb's

POTLUCK

Saturday 1/14 Clean Up: The Decker's

- 1 🎵 **How Majestic 121** [DH 2238]
- 2 🎵 56 - To God be the glory [ALL] 56
- 3 🎵 139 - Great is thy Faithfulness [ALL] 139
- 4 🎵 **Doxology 815** [DH 1981]
- 5 🎵 401 - The church's one foundation [ALL] 401
- 6 🎵 235 - Take the Name of Jesus with You [v. 1,2] 235
- 7 🎵 **What a mighty God we serve 672**

Psalm 119:160 (NASB)

160 The sum of Your word is truth, And every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.

Luke 1:1-4 (NASB)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, ³ it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the

beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; ⁴ so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught.

How many years have you been hearing the Bible is filled with contradictions?

Someone who is invested in proving that disbelief in God is legitimate will tell you that there are thousands of contradictions, all unresolvable, rendering it an incoherent document riddled with error.

One website quoted a scholar who said that there was a total number of 63,779 contradictions.

Christians believe, for the most part, that Scripture is without error, and they have centuries, and millennia even, of study to back up their claims, and to understand what some say are contradictions. Those saying that the Bible is contradictory rely on a few centuries of sarcasm and some current websites. Which is more likely to be reliable?

Look at our text for today.

Notice that Luke says "**having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write *it* out for you in consecutive order.**"

This means that Dr. Luke interviewed Mary, the mother of Jesus. He talked with Lazarus and got his slant on being resurrected from the dead.

He talked with the synagogue official and his daughter about Jesus raising her from the dead.

He talked with the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years and was healed by Jesus.

He interviewed all the apostles.

And, being of scientific orientation, he made sure to get his facts straight.

And, that's one reason we can celebrate with the Psalmist:

Psalm 119:160 (NASB)

160 The sum of Your word is truth

That means the totality of God's words are truth.

And, Paul says:

Titus 2:15 (NASB)

15 These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.

A great website to help you with these alleged contradictions is <http://www.apologeticspress.org/AllegedDiscrepancies.aspx>

Here's something to think about: Do differences in Bible accounts automatically mean contradiction?

When the scoffers give their lists of alleged contradictions, most of the apparent contradictions on the list are well known to anyone who teaches the Bible.

Is the creation story the same in **Genesis 1** and **Genesis 2**?

Where did Cain get his wife?

Where were the Ten Commandments given, on Mt. Sinai or Mt. Horeb?

Who was the father of a given biblical figure, person A or person B?

Does Paul teach salvation by faith while James teaches salvation by works?

When thinking through these questions, the first thing to keep in mind is that these are hardly new issues, even though some people in the church are sometimes unaware of these differences in the Bible text.

The Apostle Peter had to work to understand some of the things written by the Apostle Paul.

And Augustine discussed some of the difficulties.

But anyone with a good study Bible and a concern for these questions will find them discussed and explained in helpful ways.

For example, the two accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 are not contradictory; one is an overview of creation, while the second zeroes in on the creation of humanity.

There is NO contradiction here, just complementary accounts.

Similarly, the writings of Paul and James aren't contradictory as they may seem at first glance.

Paul discusses the entry into salvation, while James looks back and asks what that salvation looks like in retrospect.

Other Pauline texts like Ephesians 2:10, Titus 2:11-14, and Titus 3:5-7 take up the themes James raises.

This points to a second item to keep in mind.

If we pull out single Bible verses and ignore their context, we can create a greater sense of difference than may actually be there.

What this all means is that Bible texts need to be read in their entirety, not just cited in a list side by side.

They need to be studied, sometimes quite carefully.

There is nothing new in these lists.

Answers and responses exist.

You need to know where you can go to have these kinds of issues explained so that you'll recognize the difference between a difference and a contradiction.

Our own church website is filled with VERY helpful study material.

<http://www.orcuttchristian.org/>

On our website, you will find an old but goodie by **John Haley**.

It is virtually the standard for discussions on those alleged contradictions.

In **Alleged Discrepancies of the Bible**, **John Haley** directly addresses questions surrounding common misunderstandings of Scripture.

This book is essential for your personal library because it explains

questionable passages, helps answer skeptics' questions, and contains valuable resource material.

You can download a copy from our website; or, preferably, go to <https://smile.amazon.com/> and purchase it.

That way OCC will get 5% of the purchase price.

By the way, Orcutt Christian Church was the first church in Santa Maria to put up a website, and that was July of 1997.

I am now reading two different biographies of Benjamin Franklin. They are very different in what they cover about his life, and report things very differently.

Why?

I suspect it is because each author has something different he wishes to highlight.

Similarly, no single Bible writer claims to tell the whole story. Recall that Matthew, Mark, and Luke have a lot of passages in common, so they are called the synoptic Gospels.

Synoptic means viewed together.

The authors have some parallel passages among them, and some passages that give a different slant.

The four Gospel accounts differ from one another precisely because the authors had different audiences to whom they were addressing themselves.

Matthew was written primarily for a Jewish audience, and numerous Old Testament quotations are found within that record.

Mark was written mainly for a Roman populace interested in power.

Luke seems to have the personal interactions between Jesus and His listeners in mind.

John writes to convince His readers that Jesus the Christ is actually the Son of God.

We get a more complete picture from four different witnesses than we could ever have obtained from a single source.

The Bible is a collection of 66 “books” that were written over a period of more than 1,500 years.

In a typical printed Bible, the longest book, the book of Psalms, takes up more than 100 pages, the shortest, 2 John, less than a page.

More than 40 different people wrote the various books of the Bible over that 1500 years.

Some of them were rich, some were poor.

Among them were kings, poets, prophets, musicians, philosophers, farmers, teachers, a priest, a statesman, a shepherd, a tax collector, a physician, and a couple of fishermen.

They wrote in palaces and in prisons, in great cities and in the wilderness, in times of terrible war and in times of peace and prosperity.

They wrote stories, poems, histories, letters, proverbs, and prophecies.

Those 40 authors wrote in three languages, from three continents. Because it was written so long ago, there are things that we, in the 21st century, may find difficult to understand.

But our heart and spirit can grasp what God’s heart and His Spirit tell us: that we are beloved by Him, now and forever.

Now, let's think about those alleged contradictions.

Take a look at the front of your bulletin, and see the sign. Would you agree that it represents a contradiction?

I. What Is A Contradiction?

The academic field of study called **Logic**, has a principle called the **Law of Contradiction**.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, wrote a treatise on the **Law of Contradiction** in the fourth century B.C.

What he described is still held valid by philosophers today.

Aristotle wrote: "**A thing cannot both be and not be, taken in the same sense and at the same time.**"

If I say to you, "I am standing behind the pulpit."

And, I say to you "I am sitting behind the pulpit," you can see immediately that there is a contradiction.

And, Aristotle also formulated the **Law of Rationality**, which says that "**one ought to draw such conclusions as are justified by the evidence.**"

So, one should not accept a charge for or against a matter unless the evidence demands the charge be accepted.

This is sorta like the saying "**innocent until proven guilty.**"

Books, like people, ought to be considered truthful and consistent until it can be demonstrated that they are not.

Great attempts have been made to absolve the Greek and Latin classics of contradictions under the presumption that the authors did not contradict themselves.

Surely the Bible deserves at least an equally charitable approach.

Now, keep in mind that the Law of Contridiction simply stated is "nothing can both be and not be."

So, when you are confronted with an alleged contradiction, you must ask yourself these questions:

- (1) Is the same person or same thing under consideration?
- (2) Is the same time period in view?
- (3) Is the language that seems to be self-contradictory employed in the same sense?

It is vitally important that these questions be answered correctly.

For instance, let us analyze the following two statements:

Robert is rich.

Robert is poor.

Do these statements contradict one another?

Well ... not necessarily!

Why are they not necessarily contradictory?

Well, two different people named Robert could be under

consideration.

And two different time frames might be in view.

Robert could have been rich but, due to financial disaster, he became poor.

And the terms “rich” and “poor” might have been used in different senses.

Robert could be spiritually rich but economically poor.

Aristotle's **Law of Rationality**, says that "**one ought to draw such conclusions as are justified by the evidence.**"

The point is this: it never is proper to assume a contradiction exists until every possible means of harmonization has been fully exhausted.

II. Application of the Law of Rationality

Now, let this principle be applied to the Bible.

A. Same Person or Same Thing

A critic of the bible suggested that whereas Noah's ark (**Genesis 6**) with all of its inmates must have weighed several tons , the priests were said to have carried the ark across the Jordan River (**Joshua 3**).

This critic did not even know the difference between Noah's ark and the Ark of the Covenant!

Again, the New Testament affirms that faith saves apart from works; on the other hand, the New Testament declares that faith apart from works cannot save.

Some contend, “Surely, this is a contradiction.”

The fact is it is not, for different types of works are addressed in the Scriptures.

Salvation involves works of obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ (James 2:14ff.; Philippians 2:12), but it cannot be obtained by works of the Mosaic Law (Romans 3:28; 4:2ff.) or by boastful

works of human merit (Ephesians 2:9).
There is no contradiction in the Bible on this point.

B. Same Time Reference

The Bible records: “God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31).

And then: “And it repented Jehovah that he had made man on earth, and it grieved him at his heart” (6:6).

The sceptic cites both verses and claims that God simultaneously was satisfied and dissatisfied with His creation.

But the sceptic fails to mention that between those two statements hundreds of years of history separated them!

Judas, one of the Lord’s disciples, was empowered to perform miracles (cf. Matthew 10:1-18), yet he is called “the son of perdition” (John 17:12).

Is there a contradiction here?

No, for it was a couple of years after the time of the limited commission (Matthew 10) before Judas commenced to apostatize from the Lord (John 12:6; 13:2,27).

The time element is vitally important in understanding some passages.

Some have charged the Bible with a mistake in connection with the time of Jesus’ trial and death.

Mark writes that the Lord was crucified at the third hour (Mark 15:25), while John’s account has the Savior being tried at the sixth hour (John 19:14), seemingly three hours after His death.

John’s time reference, however, was based upon Roman civil days, while Mark computed according to Jewish time.

Again, the “contradiction” dissolves.

C. Same Sense

If the Bible is to be understood, it is imperative that recognition be given to the different senses in which words may be employed.

Normally, words are used literally, but they can be employed figuratively as well.

In Matthew 11:14, John the Baptizer is identified as “Elijah,” yet, the forerunner of Christ, in John 1:21, plainly denied that he was Elijah.

These verses are reconciled quite easily.

Though John was not literally Elijah physically reincarnated, nevertheless he was the spiritual antitype of the great prophet; he prepared the way for the Lord “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Luke 1:17).

Did the apostle Paul contradict himself when he affirmed on one occasion that he was “as touching the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless” (Philippians 3:6), and yet, at another time, he acknowledged that he was “chief” of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)? Again, the answer must be “No.”

In the former passage, Paul was describing the reputation he enjoyed among his Hebrew contemporaries as a Pharisee, while in the latter verse, he expressed the anguish he felt at having been a persecutor of the Christian Way.

How sad that some are almost totally ignorant of the principles that resolve Bible difficulties.

One of the implications of the **Law of Contradiction** is the concept that “**nothing can have at the same time and at the same place contradictory and inconsistent qualities.**”

A door may be open or shut, but the same door may not be both open and shut at the same time.

Open and shut are opposites, yet they are not contradictory unless they are affirmed of the same object at the same time.

Here is the principle: opposites are not necessarily contradictory. Let this principle be applied to certain biblical matters.

Was Paul both “perfect” and “imperfect” at the same time?

Some have charged that he so claimed.

In Philippians 3:12, the apostle declared that he had not been “already made perfect,” while in the 15th verse he wrote: “Let us, therefore, as many as are perfect, be thus minded.”

How is this problem resolved?

A careful analysis of the language employed will solve this alleged discrepancy.

When Paul claimed that he had not been “made perfect,” he used a perfect tense form of the Greek term which literally suggested that the apostle had not arrived at a permanent state of perfection.

On the other hand, in the latter verse Paul used an adjective that actually means full-grown or mature.

And so, while Paul denied that he was already in possession of permanent perfection, he did claim to possess spiritual maturity. There is no conflict between these passages.

Does the Bible contradict itself, as is often suggested, when it asserts that God both loves and hates?

No, for though these terms are opposites, when used of God they do not express His disposition toward the same objects.

God loves every sinner in the world (John 3:16), but He hates every false way (Psalm 119:104).

He loves righteousness, but hates iniquity (Psalm 45:7), and hence responds toward such with either goodness or severity (Romans 11:22).

No contradiction here.

D. Confusing supplementation with contradiction

Another important point to be emphasized is this: one must not confuse supplementation with contradiction.

In a contradiction, two facts are mutually exclusive.

In supplementation, two facts merely complement one another.

If one says, for example, that John is a husband, and then, of the same John, that he is not a husband, well that is contradiction.

On the other hand, if one says that John is a husband, and John is a

father, that is not a contradiction.

It merely is supplementing statement number two.

Many alleged Bible discrepancies can be answered by a recognition of this principle.

The case of the healing of the blind men of Jericho presents an interesting study in supplementation (Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52; Luke 18:35-43).

Two prominent problems have been set forth.

First, while both Mark and Luke mention the healing of one blind man, Matthew records the healing of two blind men.

Second, Matthew and Mark indicate that the blind men were healed as Jesus was leaving Jericho, whereas Luke seems to suggest that a blind man was healed as the Lord “approaching” the city.

As a discussion of these passages is begun, let this vital consideration be remembered—**if there is any reasonable way of harmonizing these records, no legitimate contradiction can be charged to the accounts!**

How, then, shall these narratives be reconciled?

Several reasonable possibilities have been posed by scholarly writers.

That this is the same incident is seen in the similarity of the accounts, beginning with the two beggars sitting on the roadside. They call out to Jesus, referring to Him as “Son of David” (Matthew 20:30; Mark 10:48; Luke 18:38), and in all three accounts, they are rebuked by those nearby and told to be quiet but continue to shout out to Jesus (Matthew 20:31; Mark 10:48; Luke 18:39).

The three accounts describe nearly identical conversations between Jesus and the beggars and the conclusions of the stories are also identical. The beggars receive their sight immediately and follow Jesus.

Only Mark chooses to identify one of the beggars as Bartimaeus, perhaps because Bartimaeus was known to Mark’s readers, or they

knew Bartimaeus's father, Timaeus, whereas the other blind man was a stranger to them.

In any case, the fact that Mark and Luke only mention one beggar does not contradict Matthew's account.

Mark and Luke never say there was only one beggar.

They simply focus on the one, Bartimaeus, who was probably the more vocal of the two.

Matthew refers to both of the blind men calling out to Jesus, clearly indicating there were two.

Had Mark and Luke stated that Christ healed only one man, with Matthew affirming that more than one were healed, an error surely would be apparent, but such is not the case.

If one says, "I have a son," he does not contradict himself by stating further, "I have a son and a daughter."

The latter statement merely supplements the former.

There is no discrepancy, therefore, with reference to the number of men involved.

The other issue in question is whether Jesus was entering Jericho or leaving it.

How shall the second problem be resolved?

Several reasonable possibilities have been advanced.

But, perhaps the most popular viewpoint among reputable writers is the fact that at the time of Christ there actually were two Jerichos.

First, there was the Jericho of Old Testament history (**Joshua 6:1ff.**; **1 Kings 16:34**) that was located at the sight of Elijah's spring.

In the first century, that city lay almost in ruins.

About two miles south of that site was the new Jericho, built by Herod the Great.

The Lord, traveling from the north toward Jerusalem, first would pass through the old Jericho, then some two miles to the southwest, would go through Herodian Jericho.

The miracles under consideration, therefore may have been performed between two towns.

Accordingly, the references in Matthew and Mark to leaving Jericho would allude to the old city, whereas Luke's observation to drawing near to Jericho would refer to the newer community. Again, no contradiction is apparent.

E. Hyperboles

Jesus normally speaks in the hyperbole of a wisdom teacher, not the legal precision of a Pharisee.

And "yaw!" all know about hyperboles.

Hyperboles are exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally.

Some synonyms help us understand these literary devices: exaggeration, overstatement, magnification, embroidery, embellishment, excess, overkill, rhetoric, puffery.

There are two notorious hyperboles that the critics attack, the mustard seed, and the beam in the fellow's eye.

Using a hyperbole is an acceptable literary Scriptural device, which is an intentional exaggeration to draw attention to the main point.

Jesus uses a hyperbole when he says that we should not pull a speck out of our brother's eye, while we have a big beam in our eye.

Matthew 7:3 (NASB)

3 "Why do you look at the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"

Can we literally have a log in our eye?

Can we rightly say, "There's an error in Scripture, because no one can literally have a log in his eye!"

However, the attitude behind the "gotcha" misses the literary technique of hyperbole.

When the crowd heard Jesus use this hyperbole of the log in the eye, I suspect they had a hearty laugh, and fully understood his point.

In dealing with so-called “contradictions” in the Bible, let these principles be carefully remembered.

☞ No contradiction exists between verses that refer to different persons or things.

☞ No contradiction exists between passages that involve different time elements.

☞ No contradiction exists between verses that employ phraseology in different senses.

☞ Supplementation is not the same as contradiction.

☞ One need show only the possibility of harmonization between two passage that appear to conflict in order to negate the force of an alleged discrepancy.

Finally, this point needs to be made: the differences in various Bible accounts of the same events actually demonstrate the independence of the divine writers and prove that they were not in collusion!

God, although using human writers in the composition of the Bible, is nevertheless its ultimate Author.

God cannot be the source of confusion

1 Corinthians 14:33 (NASB)

³³ for God is not a God of confusion

And, God cannot be the source of contradiction

Hebrews 6:18 (NASB)

¹⁸ it is impossible for God to lie

And since God is perfect it must be acknowledged that the Bible is perfectly harmonious.

This does not mean that we will not struggle with difficult passages.

Peter wrote that some of Paul's writings were difficult to understand.

Peter says:

2 Peter 3:14-18 (NASB)

14 Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, 15 and regard the patience of our Lord *as* salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, 16 as also in all *his* letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as *they do* also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. 17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, be on your guard so that you are not carried away by the error of unprincipled men and fall from your own steadfastness, 18 but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him *be* the glory, both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.

Notice that he suggested that there are “**some things hard to understand,**” which is quite different than saying that all things are hard to understand.

Peter says “**hard to understand,**” he did not say that these things were impossible to understand.

And, even though these things were hard to understand, Peter makes it clear that those who fail to do so because of a lack of effort, do so at their own peril.

As far as I am aware, no one argues that difficulties or differences are the same as a contradiction.

Difficulties may require some effort at times, but they do not disprove inspiration, nor do they present a real problem for believers.

Differences in meaning are found in Scripture due to the covenants

in force, different contexts, different circumstances, translation issues, etc.

On the other hand, contradictions cannot be explained away. A genuine contradiction would be an insurmountable problem. If the God of the Bible cannot lie, then neither can His message to mankind communicate that which is a lie.

Conservative scholar Wayne Grudem says:

"Our understanding of Scripture is never perfect, and this means that there may be cases where we will be unable to find a solution to a difficult passage at the present time. This may be because the linguistic, historical, or contextual evidence we need to understand the passage correctly is presently unknown to us."

Can we solve all problem texts?
Not to everyone's satisfaction.

If seeming discrepancies are discovered, let us apply ourselves to a diligent study to resolve them; but let us never foolishly charge God with allowing His sacred writers to contradict one another.

There is so much more that could be said, but for me, I sing ...

**The B-I-B-L-E,
Yes that's the book for me,
I stand alone on the Word of God,
The B-I-B-L-E.**

**The B-I-B-L-E,
Yes that's the book for me,
I read and pray, trust and obey,
The B-I-B-L-E.**

Now, how do you apply the truth that the bible is God's word to you?

If you claim to be a believer, do you trust the bible enough to put it into practice?

Are you as willing to obey its commands as you are to claim its promises?

If you haven't committed your life to Jesus the Messiah, what are you going to do with the Bible?

The Bible is the only book that tells you how to have eternal life.

You can't be neutral about what God commands you to do.

You must either accept what it says, or you must reject it.

If you accept it, and do what God says you must do to have eternal life, heaven awaits.

If you reject it, you will spend eternity out of God's loving presence, because hell awaits.

What are you going to do with the Bible?

Prayer and Invitation

January 15 Lesson 7 **Praise God the Provider**

Devotional Reading: Psalm 66:1-5

Background Scriptures: Psalms 65; 67:6, 7

PSALM 65

1 Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled. **2** You who answer prayer, to you all people will come. **3** When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. **4** Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple. **5** You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, **6** who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, **7** who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations. **8** The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy. **9** You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. **10** You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. **11** You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. **12** The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. **13** The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.

KEY VERSE

*You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.—**Psalm 65:5***

Introduction

A. Waiting for Rain

My state of Nebraska is an agricultural powerhouse. Rich soil, flat land, and sufficient rain make this possible. There has been plenty of rain this year, and record harvests are predicted. But this was not the case two years ago. The usual summer rains did not come.

Fields languished in drought conditions. The harvest was a disaster for many farmers.

Science can explain how the cycle of precipitation works, even predict rain with some accuracy, but no technology exists to bring rain reliably. So we wait and pray. We don't understand how God controls the rain, but we believe that he does—so we ask for his help. When we pray for rain, we are not asking “Mother Nature” to provide it!

Psalm 65 presents God as the Creator of the systems of the earth, and the one in control of these systems. The psalmist surely knew of years when Israel suffered drought, and crops were meager. Yet his confidence remained in God. If God is powerful enough to create the earth, surely he is powerful enough to control the earth and its weather. God did not create something bigger than he! Some religions of antiquity had separate gods for creation and weather. For example, Canaanite religion featured an ancient creator god who had withdrawn from human affairs. By contrast, their most worshipped deity was the weather or storm god, the one whom they sought to appease and please with their sacrifices. No such nonsense for the psalmist! There is only one God, and he has never withdrawn from his creation.

B. Lesson Background

Many psalms have superscriptions (see discussion in the Lesson Background of lesson 5). Psalm 65 is one that does, and the superscription introduces what follows as being “A psalm of David. A song.” Thus King David, “the hero of Israel’s songs” (2 Samuel 23:1), is the author.

The superscribed introduction also indicates it was “For the director of music.” This is more than a dedication. It serves as permission for the composition to be used by those who orchestrated the musical praise for Israel’s national celebrations. The psalm serves to reveal the heart of the man whom the Lord selected to be king of his chosen nation, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22).

The Israel of David’s era seems to have been a nation of singers and instrumentalists (1 Chronicles 13:8; etc.). They had no

electronic amplification. They had no technology to allow projection of words on a screen. And Israelite worship did not feature songs that people had been listening to all week on personal devices. Instead, worship featured heartfelt songs sung from memory, sung with passion and conviction.

Psalm 65 seems to have been one those.

I. People's Praise

(Psalm 65:1-4)

A. Because God Hears (vv. 1, 2)

1. Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.

The psalm begins dramatically by addressing the Lord. The address is an invitation for the Lord to be the audience for the upcoming service of *praise*. The people will not be there *in Zion* to celebrate themselves. Since the praise service is for God, it cannot begin without his presence.

A further clarification of purpose presents itself in the mention of *vows*. The vows to *be fulfilled* are, in various ways, dedications of loyalty to the Lord (compare Numbers 6:21; 30:2; Deuteronomy 23:21; Psalm 116:18; etc.). This helps us understand the reference to *Zion*. There is no temple in Jerusalem in David's day, but Zion is the designated place of worship for the people of Israel. It is the hill upon which the City of David has been built (see 2 Samuel 5:7). It is the holy place for the king's residence (see Psalm 2:6). And now the Lord, the great king, is being invited to join the celebrants in his beloved place (see Psalm 78:68). Worship includes dedicating oneself to God.

How to Say It

Canaanite *Kay-nun-ite*.

panentheism pah-**nen(t)**-thee-izum.

pantheism **pan(t)**-thee-ih-zum.

Zion Zi-un.

What Do You Think?

What steps can we take to improve our praise?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In inviting God to be the audience

In clarifying purpose(s)

Other

TAKING VOWS SERIOUSLY

Did you make any vows for the new year of 2017? Or do you consider New Year's resolutions a tradition that has outworn its welcome? Many people still take the idea seriously (at least for a few days into the new year) as they vow to do better in setting goals, changing habits, etc.

Various kinds of vows, how they are made, and how they are fulfilled or broken are familiar. For example, marriage vows at their finest express God's ideals by which a man and a woman agree to order their marriage henceforth. Given the high percentage of divorce among Christians, one wonders why the vow was not kept.

The New Testament has important things to say about the taking of oaths or vows (see Matthew 5:33-37; 23:16-22; Acts 18:18; Hebrews 6:16; James 5:12). While studying those, we may arrive at different conclusions regarding the form, content, and context of oaths/vows appropriate for the New Testament era. But who can doubt that promises—whether made to God or others—should be taken seriously? A vague resolution to “be more faithful” to God in the coming year will not be nearly as motivating as a vow tied to a specific carry through. That's what the psalmist has in mind.—C. R. B.

2. You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.

The fact that God does *answer prayer* implies (1) that people pray to him and (2) he does more than just listen to prayers—he also responds. With notable exceptions (Proverbs 28:9; Isaiah 1:15; Jeremiah 7:16; Lamentations 3:44; etc.), prayers receive his full attention (compare Proverbs 15:8, 29; Isaiah 38:5; Jeremiah 29:12; 1 Peter 3:12; etc.). His ability to pay attention to millions of prayers simultaneously teaches us something important about his power!

How can this be? How can God attend to millions of prayers at the same time? The psalmist does not explain here, but consider that time as we experience it does not limit or bind God (see 2 Peter 3:8). Our timeless, ageless Lord does not need to hurry through the prayers that come to him. In ways that are beyond our understanding, God is able to give all the attention he desires to each prayer, whether that prayer be a word of praise, thanksgiving, or request (compare Daniel 9:23; Acts 10:4).

All people are to come only before the Lord with prayer. When the pagan neighbors of Israel pray to their fictitious gods of mountains, rivers, the sun, etc., they miss the only valid prayer destination in the universe.

B. Because God Purges (v. 3)

3. When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.

The psalmist wastes no time in addressing the biggest barrier to worship: *sins* and *transgressions* (compare Psalm 32:5). The fact that God is the one who forgives them is what makes worship possible. The word translated *forgave* is the vitally important Old Testament word that is rendered “make atonement” in many other places. Only God in his mercy and grace can grant the forgiveness the worshipper needs—and he does! See Micah 7:18.

What Do You Think?

What can we do to ensure that sin does not hinder worship?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Considering the seriousness of sin

Considering how sin is conquered

Regarding sins committed against you

Other

C. Because God Blesses (v. 4)

4. Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

Those who are forgiven (v. 3) are the ones God chooses. Everyone

is eligible to be forgiven, but forgiveness by the Almighty is not earned. Nor is it some kind of inalienable right. Rather, it is a deliberate act of the willing God on the repentant.

Being forgiven and chosen has the immediate privilege of being allowed to come *near to* the Lord. The psalmist continues this figurative depiction in terms of being admitted to the Lord's *holy temple*; this implies close fellowship. The presence of the Lord is signified by viewing his *house* and his *holy temple* as one and the same (see Ezra 3:10, 11; Zechariah 8:9).

There is value in having a dedicated place for worship, a sanctuary for corporate praise and prayer. It is true that we can worship the Lord even while driving in heavy freeway traffic, but that will not be without distractions. Nor will it have the sense of holiness of which the psalmist speaks. Although God does not live in our church buildings (compare Acts 17:24), efforts to create appropriate space for worship will not go unrewarded.

II. Psalmist's Analysis

(Psalm 65:5-8)

A. How God Answers (vv. 5-7)

5a. You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior,

The psalmist now begins to consider the vast scope of God's power. The Hebrew word behind the translation *awesome* carries the sense of causing fear (example Psalm 76:7). Indeed, the *awesome and righteous deeds* that form God's response to us should result in reverential fear on our part. We do not cower in dread, because the fact that God is *our Savior* removes any reason for such a posture. This just as true for us as it was for the ancient psalmist (compare Isaiah 41:10).

5b. the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas,

The fact stated in verse 5a leads the psalmist to proclaim the universal, worldwide reach of human appreciation for God's mighty acts. He and he alone is the one in whom to place *hope* for salvation. This is true even in the most remote location the psalmist can imagine. Since God has created everything, he is not merely the national God of Israel. All people must look to him (compare

Psalm 22:27; Jeremiah 32:27).

6, 7. who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations.

How did *the mountains* get here? Who had a wagon big enough to transport them to the right place? Why does *the roaring of the seas* and *their waves* eventually become calm and quiet instead of continuing indefinitely? For the psalmist, the answer is inescapable: only God is powerful enough to bring about such things, for he is the master of that which he has created.

What Do You Think?

What would you say to someone for whom relief from a violent force of nature came about only after his or her house was destroyed?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

If victim reasons that God is evil or powerless

If victim reasons that randomly destructive forces of nature prove there is no God

If victim says the loss is punishment for sin

The psalmist extends this last illustration into human affairs. We know all too well of the warlike propensities of humans, their *turmoil* (Psalm 2:1). Someone rises to power and wants to gain prestige and wealth, so armies march, battles wage, and chaos ensues.

We understand (and hate) the impulse to violence and war, but do we understand peace? Why is there ever any peace at all and not continual war? The psalmist teaches us that peace between nations, even temporary peace, is brought about only by the intention and power of the Lord. The God who calms the seas also calms *the nations*, for he is master of both (Psalm 22:28; Isaiah 17:12, 13).

B. What God Reveals (v. 8)

8a. The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders;

We need not picture our psalmist as a world traveler or a master of world geography to appreciate what he says here. He knows that

every part of the earth has evidence of God's *wonders*, a word frequently found alongside the word "signs" (example: Jeremiah 32:21).

The psalmist makes this affirmation not because he's personally seen the awe of the people who live in *the whole earth*. The statement comes from faith. He is completely convinced that each and every part of the earth testifies to its residents concerning the power of God the Creator. How could it be otherwise?

8b. where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy.

The psalmist uses another aspect of creation that everyone has experienced: the cycle of the days. Creation passages such as Psalm 104:19-23 reflect this enduring feature of life.

Whether from today's vantage point or that of the psalmist, the rising and the setting of the sun is the most dependable aspect of our natural world we can imagine. We expect that when night falls, daybreak will follow within a few hours. Weather has varying degrees of predictability, but not the daily cycle of sunrise and sunset (compare Joshua 10:12-14; Psalm 72:5; exception: Zechariah 14:6, 7).

The psalmist further pictures this cycle as a way in which nature rejoices. Such witness testifies to the power and faithfulness of God (compare Psalm 148:3).

III. God's Blessings

(Psalm 65:9-13)

A. On the Land (vv. 9, 10)

9. You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it.

The psalm now moves into territory that makes it fitting for use at the time of a harvest celebration. While we may rightly bemoan either too little or too much rain, the psalmist chooses not to complain. All waters are blessings from God, who provides the necessities of life.

This is expressed in terms we might miss if we are not careful. *The streams of God* of which the psalmist speaks contrast with the

religions of the ancient world that believe in a god for every river or stream. The pagans sacrifice to and serve these local gods so that rivers will be full. The Israelites do not see their Lord as such a dinky deity. He is the Lord of all rivers; he is the master of all water. The psalmist is grateful.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can our stewardship of the environment be a witness for the Creator?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning conservation initiatives

Concerning reactions to natural disasters

Regarding personal, everyday practices

Other

10. You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops.

This is a beautiful picture of gentle rain coming at just the right time. The fact that such rain brings needed moisture to the *furrows* and *ridges* of a plowed field speaks to the knowledge and graciousness of the one who “sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

PRAYER TENDENCIES

Many people who don't ordinarily pray did so as a drought extended itself across the southern U.S. from 2010 to 2013. Drought conditions covered about 60 percent of the lower 48 states by January 2013, with Canada and Mexico affected to varying degrees.

Human nature is such that we tend not to credit God with blessings received. But when things go badly, even people who don't ordinarily pray may seek divine relief. The psalmist observes that the earth itself praises God for his bounty. Christians more than anyone should be praising God continually for the necessities of life that he provides daily through his creation.

Try the following experiment. First, think back on your prayers for the past three days and add up the number of requests in those

prayers. Then add up the number of praises offered for what you already have. When you compare the two tallies, do you see a problem?—C. R. B.

B. On the Flocks (vv. 11-13)

11, 12. You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness.

These are words of harvest celebration. Well-stocked supermarkets have isolated most of us from the wonder and joy of harvest time. We might sing “Come, ye thankful people, come” in our Thanksgiving service, but we might not see much need to “raise the song of harvest home.”

Not so with our psalmist! He has experienced God’s *bounty* in a successful harvest. The phrase *carts overflow with abundance* sketches a picture of a harvest so great that some of its produce is falling off the wagons onto the farm roadways! But no one is concerned because there is plenty.

Even the *grasslands of the wilderness* are lush, so the grazing animals will fatten nicely and provide milk and meat. The richness of God’s creation at harvest time is so marvelous that it is as if the earth itself is involved in worship, for the *hills* themselves are said to be glad.

What Do You Think?

How do the coronation passages Psalms 8:5; 103:4; Song of Songs 3:11; and Isaiah 23:8 enrich your understanding of this one? How will this influence your life in the week ahead?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding passages where God performs the coronation
Passages where something or someone other than God performs the coronation

13. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.

Agricultural abundance is the result of God’s blessing and providential grace. The *flocks*, meaning primarily sheep and goats,

are thriving. The flocks are so abundant, it is almost as if *the meadows* themselves are clothed in sheep's wool! This word picture is extended to *the valleys*, now fully clothed with waves of *grain* ready to be harvested.

The psalmist ends by concluding that this great, rich harvest is an expression of *joy* by the earth. The land is said to *sing* as it produces our food, for that is its purpose in God's created order (see Genesis 1:29, 30). If the earth itself is praising its Creator for using it to the full, can we do any less?

Conclusion

A. Wrong Path

Pantheism is the false belief that all things are God. Closely related is the belief that God is *in* all things (panentheism). These beliefs are popular today among some people who want to be "spiritual" but reject "religions." Sometimes, pantheists point to Bible texts like Psalm 65 to justify their views, claiming the psalmist extols creation itself as being worthy of worship. The psalmist's depictions of the earth's singing for joy, etc., are thereby misinterpreted to signify that the world is a living entity, capable of offering praise to God just as humans do.

Make no mistake: a pantheistic reading of this psalm is incorrect. The psalmist does indeed marvel as he looks around at creation, but he does not pause to worship created things. He sees creation as evidence of the greatness and kindness of the one who stands behind it: the Creator.

God the Creator is a person in Psalm 65, worthy to be praised and worshipped. Part of the created order is that we are persons too. Our personhood in no way makes us equal to God, but reflects the intention in his design that we are capable of having a personal relationship with him.

We should respect God's creation, but we should never worship it. Pantheists are looking in the right direction, but they stop before they get to the mighty Creator of the universe. He is the uncreated God who loves, forgives, and cares for us.

B. Right Path

The contents of Psalm 65 suggest praise during a harvest celebration. These community gatherings may have been where the people of Israel learned the words and music of the psalm. But a psalm such as this would also have lent itself to home worship, to be taught to children and sung as a praise and thanksgiving song before the weekly minifeast of Sabbath day.

Psalm 65 still serves us well today, whether as a personal expression of praise or for lending words to corporate worship. May we honor the Lord with our hearts full of thanksgiving. May our voices of joy join with the witness of earth as we lift our praises to the Lord, the Creator of all.

C. Prayer

Holy God, we praise you for providing for our needs. May we focus on our blessings, not on what we think we lack. We pray this in the name of the one who was and is your greatest blessing: your Son, Jesus. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

May praise for the Lord always be waiting in our hearts.

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