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**THE BIBLE —
USED AND MISUSED**

Years ago, a church deacon named Jim, was frustrated by Jehovah's Witnesses who frequently came to his door. He asked his pastor how to handle the situation. "Jim, here's what you can do," his pastor answered. "Jehovah's Witnesses are taught it is idolatry to salute the American flag. So put up a flag in your home. The next time they come to your door, simply invite them inside and ask them to salute the flag.

He didn't have long to wait. The following Saturday, a woman with a big satchel over her shoulder rang Jim's doorbell. "Come right in," he exclaimed, ushering the unsuspecting woman inside. Pointing to the American flag, he said, "I'll listen to anything you have to say, if you'll just do this one thing for me: I want you to put your hand over your heart and say the Pledge of Allegiance!"

The color drained from her face; visibly shaken, she, nevertheless, put her hand over her heart and stammered out the Pledge of Allegiance. Upon finishing, she exclaimed, "You know, I've been selling Avon products for 15 years now, and this is the first time anyone has ever asked me to say the Pledge of Allegiance!"

A change came to the American flag when Hawaii and Alaska were granted statehood in 1959-1960. There had been 48 stars on the flag, now there were 50. Not too long after this I was in San Diego and attended an afternoon meeting in which Gordon Lindsay spoke along the lines of healing and faith.

At the close of the message, he asked if there were any questions. One lady stood and asked: "Brother Lindsay, don't you think the United States has committed a horrible sin in changing our flag from 48 stripes to 50 stripes since we took in Alaska and Hawaii? Jesus took 48 stripes upon his back for our healing and this was symbolized by the 48 stripes on the American flag. Now this has been changed!" She was upset.

Lindsay was careful not to put the woman down for the gross ignorance displayed in her statement. He simply said we are not told exactly how many stripes were inflicted on Jesus, though by Jewish law it would not have been over forty (Deut. 25:3; 2 Cor. 11:24).

The fact is, of course, there never were 48 stripes on the American flag! It was the *stars* that were changed from 48 to 50 when Alaska and Hawaii attained statehood.

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus healed a man who was deaf and had an impediment of speech. "He took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers in his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue...Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly" (Mark 7:32-35).

This passage is commonly taken to mean it was *Jesus* who put his fingers into the deaf man's ears, that it was *Jesus* who spit and touched the man's tongue and so it would seem in our English translation. But it could be that it was the man himself who did these things. Consider the words of Adam Clarke (1762-1832):

It is possible that what is attributed here to *Christ* belongs to the *person* who was cured. I will give my sense of the place in a short paraphrase.

And Jesus took him aside from the multitude: and [the deaf man] put his fingers into his ears, intimating thereby to Christ that they were so stopped that he could not hear; and having spat out, that there might be nothing remaining in his mouth to offend the sight when Christ should look at his tongue, he touched his tongue, showing to Christ it was so bound he could not speak: and he looked up to heaven, as if to implore assistance from above: and he groaned, being distressed because of his present affliction, and thus implored relief: for, not being able to speak, he could only groan and look up, expressing by these signs, as well as he could, his afflicted state...

Then Jesus, having compassion upon him, said, Be opened: and immediately his ears were opened, so that he could hear distinctly; and the impediment to his speaking was removed, so that he spoke properly.

The original will admit of this interpretation; and this, I am inclined to believe is the true meaning of this otherwise (to me and many others) unaccountable passage. (*Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 5, p. 313).

In the Old Testament, it is not uncommon to read a man's name, his *age*, and then the words: "and he died" (Gen. 5). But what about the ages of *women*?

Of all the women mentioned in the Bible, the age at death has only been given for one: Sarah! "Sarah lived one hundred and twenty-seven years" (Gen. 23:1). Except for the daughter of Jarius who was age twelve (Mark 5:42) and Anna, for whom an approximate age is given (Luke 2:36,37), Sarah is the only woman for whom an exact age is given, in life or death.

Sarah's age became significant because Isaac was born to her at an advanced age. When the promise of this child was given to Abraham, he laughed and said: "Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Gen. 17:17).

According to a Jewish legend, there were women in the neighborhood who doubted Sarah had actually given birth to Isaac. If she had indeed given birth, they wanted her to prove it by nursing their babies. She refused to do this and their doubts seemed confirmed. When Abraham heard about it, he told Sarah: "Uncover your breasts and provide milk for this entire brood," which she did!

If this legend is a true account of events, it explains a verse that otherwise is quite obscure. Genesis 21:7 speaks of Sarah providing milk for children (plural), though she only had *one* son of her own. Sarah said: "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse *children*? For I have borne him a son in his old age."

Years ago, while speaking at a church in Elko, Nevada, I mentioned the *nine* gifts of the Spirit that are listed in First Corinthians 12:8-10. After the service someone told me there were *ten* gifts of the Spirit. The proof for this, I was told, could be found in Genesis 24:10: When Abraham's servant went to seek a wife for Isaac, he didn't take nine camels, he took TEN! I still haven't been able to figure out the connection.

During the 40 years of the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, it was said of the Israelites: "Your garments did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years" (Deut. 8:4). "They lacked nothing; their clothes did not wear out and their feet did not swell" (Neh. 9:21). In other words, they did not have to wear old clothes or old shoes.

Does this mean, as is sometimes assumed, that their clothing and shoes were supernaturally protected from wear, so that after forty years they were still wearing the same clothes and shoes? On this point, Adam Clarke has written:

The plain meaning of this much-tortured text appears to me to be this: God so amply provided for them all the necessities of life, that they never were obliged to wear tattered garments, nor were their feet injured from lack of shoes or sandals. He points out that they had various workers, carvers, jewelers, weavers, etc., among them, and so there is no reason to believe they did not have shoe cobblers and tailors also (*Clarke's Commentary*, Vol. 1, p. 760).

That they had the ability, materials, and did in fact make clothes during this time can be seen in the case of the priestly garments that were made:

"You shall make holy garments...a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron...and his sons" (Exod. 28:2-6). The commentary by Albert Barnes (1798-1870) states:

They had clothes, it would seem, in abundance (Exod. 12:34,35) at the beginning of the forty years; and during those years they had many sheep and oxen, and so must have had much material for clothing always at command. No doubt also they carried on a traffic in these, as in other commodities, with the Moabites and the nomadic tribes of the desert. Such ordinary supplies must not be shut out of consideration, even if they were on occasions supplemented by extraordinary providences of God (*Barnes Commentary*, p. 287).

If the Israelites wore the *same* miracle clothes for forty years, what about the clothing of babies? With the exception of Joshua and Caleb, all who entered the Promised Land were under twenty years of age when leaving Egypt or were born during the forty years. This means that the vast majority of people who entered the Promised Land would have had garments that miraculously stretched as they grew from infancy to adulthood.

Picture, if you will, a baby that was born just before they left Egypt. Its mother makes a tiny garment for it. Are we to believe that ten years later this child is wearing the *same* garment, only now it has *stretched* to fit a ten-year-old? At forty years of age, when entering the Promised Land, was he still wearing the same garment? Would no change of clothes even be desirable?

The Bible says their clothes did not wear out upon them; that is, they did not have to wear old clothing. Their shoes did not wear out upon their feet; that is, they did not have to wear worn-out shoes. The miraculous element is that they were supplied with the necessary things— even in the wilderness. God took care of them.

I have given here what I feel is a good explanation, but I have no quarrel with any who may think otherwise.

Some folks seek divine guidance by opening the Bible and placing their finger on a verse at random. The Greeks did this with the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Romans used Virgil's *Aeneid* and the Muslims the *Koran*.

There is no example or instruction within the Bible for choosing a verse at random. I am not saying it is wrong, but such can be carried to a superstitious extreme, as though the Bible were some type of glorified Ouija board.

I have witnessed people opening the Bible for "guidance" and then try again if they did not get a verse they wanted. It is not uncommon for them to get into the "begats" or something entirely irrelevant.

Other times, a verse might seem to fit. A young lady, who was going with a huge and somewhat uncouth young man, wondered if she should marry him. When she let the Bible fall open for guidance, she read: "The LORD that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this *Philistine*," the reference being to Goliath (1 Sam. 17:37). But affection proved stronger than superstition and she married him anyhow, with no regrets.

A tale is told of a man who opened the Bible for guidance and put his finger on the verse that said: "Judas went and hanged himself." He opened again and it said: "Go and do thou likewise." When he tried again, he read: "What thou doest, do quickly," and finally: "And as many as do these things shall inherit eternal life!"

By taking only *part* of what the Bible says, one could even prove there is no God! But when we take all of the verse, it is: "The fool has said in his heart, There is no God" (Psa. 53:1).

A newly married couple used to do the evening dishes together. She would wash, he would wipe. After a while he grew tired with this little chore. Besides, he felt that wiping dishes was not man's work anyhow. But the woman found a verse which, she felt, proved otherwise: "And I will wipe Jerusalem as a MAN wipes a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down" (2 Kings 21:13).

A woman who did not want to get up early in the morning used the scripture: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning" (Isa. 5:11). But when we read the rest of the verse, it has an entirely different meaning: "Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!" It has nothing to do with what time a person gets up in the morning under other circumstances.

I am reminded of a preacher I heard some years ago who was an early riser. "I beat my wife up almost every morning," he said. Some misunderstood this and thought he *hit* his wife every morning!

Jesus said to live "by every word of God" (Matt. 4:4). An overall, consistent study of *everything* the Bible says on a subject is far better than basing conclusions on a single verse taken at random or out of context.

There is a song made famous over the years by Roy Acuff, "The Great Speckled Bird," which likens the church, with her high standards, to a speckled bird. From hearing the song, one might suppose this bird was a symbol of purity and holiness. But when God said, "My heritage is unto me as a speckled bird" (Jer. 12:9), it was not a compliment. It was a *criticism!* God's heritage had corrupted the Divine worship with heathen rites, had become like a lion roaring against God, so he *hated* it (verse 8). Strong words! The bird in the Bible had been speckled by sin.

I heard about a Christian woman who was thinking about going on a Holy Land trip. One brochure said they would be flying on a 747 airplane. She looked at the clock, it was 7:47. That settled it for her!

A story is told about three boys who were bragging about what their fathers had done. One was from New York, one from Paris, and the other from Israel. The boy from New York said: "You know the Empire State Building, my father *built* that." The boy from Paris said: "You know the Eiffel Tower, my father *built* that." The boy from Israel said: "You know the Dead Sea, my father *killed* that!"

It is said that when the Panama Canal was first planned, someone felt that building a canal between North and South America was against the Bible. A scripture was quoted: "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt. 19:6). This was really taking a text out of context!

It is commonly supposed that the Panama Canal (which shortened the voyage between Atlantic and Pacific ports by as much as 7,000 miles) crosses Panama from *east to west*. But from Limon Bay to Gatun Lake, the canal runs due south, and then takes a turn eastward. The Pacific side is actually more than twenty miles *east* of its Atlantic beginning.

In 2012 I was invited to serve as Guest Clergy on a 14-day cruise from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, through the Panama Canal, to San Diego, California. Holland America Line is to be commended for including, among other activities, the opportunity for people to attend church. My ministry duty was to conduct the Interdenominational Church Services on the ship, also a Valentine's Day Celebration in which over 60 couples renewed their marriage vows. Following my message for that occasion, while a string ensemble consisting of cello and violins played, each couple made commitments to each other in their own words. That was a very unique time.

I have read that many years ago some objected to street lights on the basis that "God divided the light from the darkness" (Gen. 1:18) and man was not to interfere with this arrangement! Besides, people would stay out all night and catch cold!

A practice that has become widespread is Daylight Saving Time. We *spring forward* an hour in the spring and *fall back* an hour in the fall. Some like it; some don't. One woman who felt this was tampering with God's timetable, told a pastor I know: "I don't really like the idea, but I will admit *that extra hour of sunlight is good for my flowers!*"

I had a man tell me once that Daylight Saving Time is "against the Bible" that "somewhere in the Bible it says the Devil would change the times and seasons in the last days" (Dan. 7:25?).

On the other hand, someone in favor of Daylight Saving Time could quote the scripture: "It shall come to pass, that at evening time it shall be light" (Zech. 14:7). Neither text has any connection with Daylight Saving Time.

Jesus once spoke about "twelve hours in the day" (John 11:9). But how many *minutes* were there in an hour? Today, with our clocks and watches, we may assume an hour was always figured as sixty minutes. But at the time of Jesus, the day "from sunrise to sunset" was figured as twelve hours

whether it was summer (when days are longer) or winter (when days are shorter). This resulted in *variable* hours, so that in summer, an hour could be as long as 71 minutes, and in winter, as short as 49 minutes. According to the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, there are some very strict Jews, even today, who still try to follow this system!

Some suppose they can base beliefs on what the Bible does not say. For example, since the Bible nowhere has a commandment, "Thou shalt not smoke cigarettes," it must be alright to smoke. But true doctrine is built on what the Bible says, not on what it *does not say*.

The Bible does not mention cigarettes because they were not in use at the time. It is said that Europeans probably first learned of smoking when it was observed in the West Indies by the crew of Columbus in 1492. A pipe, the tabago (from which the word "tobacco" is derived) was in use. The cigarette (or whatever it was called by the natives) was made with thin palm bark to hold the tobacco and smoked through the *nose*. It was not until the end of the Seventeenth Century that smoking became a world-wide practice.

Some time back, a pastor in Colorado showed me a one-page article someone had written. It admitted smoking *tobacco* can be harmful. But it went on to say there is nothing in the Bible against smoking *flax*!—that someone needs to get flax cigarettes on the market. He quoted Matthew 12:20: "A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking *flax* shall he not quench!" The reasoning was so bizarre, we wondered if it was written as a joke. But apparently whoever wrote it was serious.

At one time the tobacco plant was believed to have healing powers. In 1559 the French ambassador to Portugal, Jean Nicot, sent seeds to his queen, Catherine de Medicis. For this service, Nicot's name has lived on in our word *nicotine*.

Some pray: "Lord, take my cigarettes, take my cigarettes!" But the Lord doesn't smoke—why would he *take* someone's cigarettes? I say this only to make a point, not to ridicule anyone. Certainly I believe in God's power to help people obtain victory over habits and addictions. But a lot of time people ask God to do this or that, and they refuse to do what he has told *them* to do.

We can pray, "Lord, I want a closer walk with you." That's good. But along with that, the Bible says: "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8). There are some things God wants *us* to do.

Some people said to their pastor: "Why are you preaching so hard at us, we haven't done anything!" To this he replied: "That's the problem!"

The LORD spoke to Ezekiel about people like that. "They come to you...as my people, and they hear your words, but they do not DO them....you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but *they do not do them*" (Ezek. 33:31,32).

May we be "DOERS of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22).
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