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GOD IS IN CONTROL?

Sometimes when bad things happen to good people I hear somebody say, "God is in control." It is rare to hear this when good things happen, or when life goes on the way it has been. Usually that phrase is meant to comfort and reassure. Is it really comforting, though? More importantly, is it true? The answer to both of these questions is, "yes AND no."

To some people it may have been reassuring, after the attacks of 9/11/01, to hear that God is in control. The intended thought is, "since God is in control, we need not worry; he will take care of us." That may be comforting, but some would question whether God being in control means that the fall of the twin towers, with the resulting deaths, was planned by God. Does God give a specific person cancer for his own reasons? Did God determine that my brother's only child would die in an automobile accident? This is hardly comforting. If God is in control, couldn't he have used less deadly means to whatever end he had in mind as a result of 9/11?

Certainly Christians can be comforted that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purposes." (Rom 8:28) Certainly God can take bad things and bring good out of them. In a very broad sense, God is in control. But when we try to comfort someone with that phrase we are more likely to be heard as saying that it is OK that God caused some "bad" thing to happen because it is really good that somebody died, got sick, or lost a job.

So, is it true? Again, yes and no. When discussing evolution you have to define whether you are talking macro or micro. Macroevolution, the idea that all dogs can be traced back to wolves or a wolf-like ancestor, is a proven and observable fact. Microevolution, the concept that all life has derived from a single source through "natural" forces that continue to act in the same way they always have, is a theory that is impossible to prove. In the same way, we have to define what we mean by "God is in control." On the one hand is macrocontrol; God will work everything out to the best for his people in general. On the other hand is microcontrol; God controls every aspect of every life. This is more commonly called "predestination." Unfortunately, most people who use that phrase do so in the latter way, whether they claim to believe in predestination or not. A flat tire is, thus, not just a flat tire,

but may have been God's way of preventing a more serious accident farther down the road. The problem is, nobody can prove it.

God may use a flat tire to protect his people. Or the flat tire may be because the driver didn't check to see that no nails fell on the driveway after he fixed his roof. The way most people say that God is in control takes away free will. It takes away personal responsibility. Instead of Flip Wilson's, "the devil made me do it," we could excuse sin because "God made me do it." Furthermore, either God will save everyone regardless of their sins, or else God chooses who he will save or condemn based on arbitrary criteria. Joshua's admonition to "choose you this day whom ye will serve," (Josh 24:15) was a worthless plea because the people couldn't really choose. (But neither could Joshua choose to say anything else.)

Habakkuk once asked God why the wicked Chileans were defeating God's people, the Jews. God told him not to worry; God is in control. (Hab 1, 2) At the same time, Jeremiah told the people of Judah to surrender to the Chileans, or die. (Jer 38:2) God's control did not extend to the personal level. It was, and is, general rather than specific.

It is not wrong to say that God is in control. There are a few people who might draw comfort from that statement. It is, after all, true to some extent. We just can't know to what extent it is true. Anyone who uses that statement must be careful that it is expressed and understood in the general sense, rather than carrying the idea that God controls every specific action of every person everywhere. It might not be a good idea to go blaming God for things he just did not do.

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IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

In the opera “Porgy and Bess” the Gershwin brothers have the drug dealer, Sporting Life, sing his doubts about the Old Testament. After making fun of the stories of Adam, Methuselah, and David and Goliath, he says, “The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible, they ain’t necessarily so.” In my experience, though, it is often the things that you’re liable to hear people say are in the Bible that “ain’t necessarily so.” Some of these are things people have asked about at my web site, www.minuteswithmessiah.com. Others are just things I have observed people over the years swear the Bible says, although it “just ain’t there.”

Misquotes

Perhaps the tamest of these areas of dispute are the simple misquotes. There are certain sayings that either sound like they come from the Bible, or they “ought to be” from the Bible.

Some of these come from Will Shakspear. That is understandable. Many people were raised hearing, but not actually reading, the King James Version of the Bible. Since this was first published around the same time as Shakespere’s plays, the English language of that day

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sounds so foreign to us that one source is confused for the other. Thus some people will believe Shakespearean quotes are scripture just because they sound like scripture. “Neither a borrower nor a lender be.” (Hamlet) “The quality of mercy is not strained.” (Merchant of Venice) “How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is to have a thankless child!” (King Lear) “The green eyed monster.” (Othello) These and many others are mistaken for scripture because they sound like King James Version scripture.

There are a number of “modern” (a compared to the age of the Bible) proverbs that ought to be in the Bible, is some people’s view. One of the most commonly hit pages on my web site asks where “God helps those who help themselves” is found in the Bible. Others ask about “cleanliness is next to godliness.”

Many people think some of Ben Franklin’s aphorisms must come from scripture.

There is probably little harm in many of these misquotes. Some are good advice, even if not from God. If there is any harm it is that these misquotes show how little some people read the Bible.

Lucifer is Satan

Thanks in part to Milton’s “Paradise Lost”, there are several things about Satan that people believe although they can’t find scripture to back it up. One of the most popular misconceptions is that Lucifer is another name for Satan. The name “Lucifer” appears only once in the Bible.

How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit. (Isa 14:12-15)

The context of this chapter clearly shows that Isaiah is prophesying against the King of Babylon. The reference has absolutely nothing, whatsoever, in any way, shape, or form (is that strong enough?) to do with Satan.

Everyone who tries to tell me that the Bible says Lucifer is Satan does so based on what they have heard. Not one is able to show scripture to back it up because the scripture above is the only one to mention Lucifer. It is so ingrained in people who don’t read the Bible that they are willing to fight to prove that what they do not know is so. (Thank you Oscar Hammerstein II for that last phrase.)

Satan rules in hell

This is another of those things that literature has so ingrained in us that we mistake the literary for the literal. Dante puts Satan imprisoned in ice in the lowest level of the Inferno. Even that may be slightly more accurate than most people’s view of Satan ruling over the demons in hell. Unfortunately, none of that is in the Bible.

Hell was “prepared for the devil and his angels.” (Matt 25:41) (Some people may go there too, but that isn’t why God created the place.) That doesn’t say, though, that he rules there. Instead, it is a place he will be cast in punishment. “And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more.” (Rev 20:2-3)

If Satan rules at all, he rules on this earth. He is called “the prince of this world.” (Jn 12:31) The prince will be forced to abdicate his throne. Then he will suffer the same torment as everyone else in hell. In a place of utter chaos and anarchy there can be no ruler. Everyone will want to be, so no one can be.

The Antichrist

When one correspondent called Satan “the antichrist incarnate” he showed his lack of scripture knowledge. Perhaps more people today show an ignorance of what the scripture says in their references to “the” antichrist than in any other misconception. People today are waiting for the coming of “the antichrist” when there is no such individual in the Bible. As with much of modern premillennial doctrine, people listen to what others say about scripture without examining what it truly says. The modern concept of the antichrist is based on a combination of Paul’s reference to the “son of perdition” (2 Thes 2:3) and John’s references to antichrists (1 Jn). Never mind that there is never any reference to “the” antichrist. Then they talk as if this individual is prophesied about in the Revelation. Although John is the only writer to use that term, he never uses it in that book.

What the Bible really says about antichrist bears no resemblance to modern ideas. First, John talks about many antichrists (1 Jn 2:18). Moreover, the concept that antichrist is yet to come is foreign to scripture. That same passage says there were many in John’s day. Those antichrists were the Gnostics and are the heirs of that philosophy.

Even if Lucifer were Satan, he could not be the Antichrist. Satan knows that Jesus is the Messiah come in the flesh. That contradicts the definition of antichrist. “And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.” (1 Jn 4:3)

People today talk of one antichrist soon to come. According to the Bible, “it ain’t necessarily so.”

The New Jerusalem

Many people, probably most people, consider the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 as being a description of heaven. We talk or joke about Peter at the Pearly Gates. We anticipate heaven, where there will be no tears. We neglect to look at several passages that indicate that the passage in the latter chapter of the Revelation is not necessarily heaven.

In that passage, John describes a city, called the New Jerusalem, which he says he saw “descending out of heaven from God.” (Rev 21:2, 10) These verses clearly state that the city is not heaven, since it comes out of

heaven. Every item described in the passage could as easily, some say more easily, describe the church. The basic rules of interpretation of this kind of book tell us that things are not what they seem. It is unlikely that this passage describes a city, or even a location or place.

This New Jerusalem, then, should be understood in terms of the old Jerusalem. That was a physical place where God’s physical people worshipped him. The new city should then be a spiritual place where God’s spiritual people worship him. It is described as being like “a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev 21:2) This is the same picture Paul uses of the church. “Ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead.” (Rom 7:4) Paul doesn’t say that we are buried with Christ to await a wedding. It is now that the church is Christ’s bride. Otherwise we are living with him out of wedlock.

The most compelling scriptures to show that the New Jerusalem is not necessarily heaven are two passages in the Revelation that some use to show that the book is not future to us, but was fulfilled almost two centuries ago. The book begins (Rev 1:1) by saying these are things,

What the Bible really says about antichrist bears no resemblance to modern ideas.

which will happen soon. That same comment is made in Revelation 22:6, immediately after the description of the New Jerusalem. If there is any significance to context in scripture, then Revelation 21 and 22 have to be describing something that began around the time the book was written. Because of these, and many other arguments, some believe that the latter part of the Revelation cannot be describing heaven, but rather is a picture of the church.

There are many more things people swear are in the Bible that aren’t there. I could probably fill another article with such things as the traditional concept of Trinity and many supposed sins that have no scriptural basis. The shame is that many people accept such ideas on the basis of someone else’s say so. If God has spoken to us, our obligation is “hear ye him.” Rather than blindly following the unfounded doctrines of men, we should listen to the one who can say, “It is necessarily so.”

SPILLED MILK

A story is told of a man who was having trouble making a living in England. He heard that there were opportunities to make a fortune in Africa, so he sailed there, leaving his family at home. When he got to the place in Africa he was to live he found that the local people had no cattle. They had to pay huge amounts for milk and cheese to be imported from far away. He had a herd of cows sent to him from home, and began selling dairy products. Soon his dairy was making money, and he could pay off the debt for the cattle. Within a couple of years he was the wealthiest man in the country. He decided it was time to go home to England and his family. He packed his few personal belongings and hired a ship, which he loaded with his wealth—milk and cheeses. Before he could leave one man offered to buy his whole supply of dairy products. The rich man refused, since this was the wealth he was taking home. After some negotiation, though, he finally relented. He gave the man a few cheeses and a small portion of the milk in return for a handful of the stones that were so plentiful in that country. By the time his sailing ship reached London several weeks later it could be smelled from a great distance. The milk had spoiled and the cheeses were moldy. In London, dairy products were plentiful and nobody would buy his spoiled product. All he had left of the wealth he had gained in Africa was a handful of rocks that had been so plentiful where he had been that they were practically worthless. In London, however, diamonds and rubies and sapphires were so rare that he was able to sell his worthless handful of stones and live comfortably, if not luxuriously, the rest of his life.

We hear this story and think how foolish this man was. Even if the milk had kept, did he really expect it to be a source of wealth at home? Had he forgotten what “civilized” people considered valuable? He had been away from home too long to remember what it was like there. Why did he not load the ship with cheap stones and become the richest man in England?

We think such things of this man in the story, but we fail to notice the log in our own eyes. Too often we are like this man. We have become so used to what is valuable in this foreign land where we live, called earth, that we have forgotten what will be valuable when we go home at the end of life. Jesus said, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matt 6:19-21) He could just as easily said that where your heart is, that will determine what you consider treasure.

We think of money and prestige as wealth, when they will spoil like milk when we die. We will be judged not by the size of our bank account but by the size of our heart. When we face the judge he will not ask how we made our money, but whether we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and assisted those who are sick or in prison. Paul tells us we are “created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” (Eph 2:10) Such *mitzvos* (good works) are so easy to do that we forget they are the currency of heaven.

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