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Ashes, Ashes

Sometimes it seems that certain thoughts hang in the air, and when one songwriter grabs one, everybody takes it up. In Christian music over the past couple of years, one of those motifs seems to be ashes. Several songs make reference to ashes. Unfortunately, most of them either go outside the scriptures for their figures of speech, or else they twist the scriptures.

Several songs make reference to “rising from the ashes,” or some variation on that theme. It makes one wonder, though, why they have to use a picture from Graeco-Roman lore to make a point in a Christian song, when none of the scriptures do so.

The phoenix was a mythical bird that lived for up to 1,400 years. Only one, apparently, existed at any given time. When it knew it was about to die it built a pyre and burned itself. Out of the ashes of the dead bird arose a young phoenix, which then grew in place of the former bird. Some early Christians (notably not any in the canon of scripture we call the New Testament) used this as a picture of the resurrection or of the new birth one receives at baptism. It is actually a very good metaphor, if one chooses to use pagan symbology for Christian concepts. And yet, this is not usually what seems to be on the mind of the authors of current songs.

One of the popular songs, performed by Shawn McDonald, pictures someone rising from the ashes of the “trouble I have found” by contemplating suicide. It is a very clear reference to the legend of the phoenix. Other than a vague reference to “he who is in me,” which could as easily be interpreted as the dreams and ambitions of the singer as a reference to the Christ, it has little to recommend it to Christians.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with using the legend of the phoenix to represent Christ, there may be some concerns. The chief one is that it reduces the resurrection to another mere fable. The resurrection becomes nothing. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul warned against those who would intimate that the resurrection never actually happened. He says that if we believe that, our whole faith is worthless.

To be fair, some other songs speak of rising from ashes with no apparent thought about the phoenix legend. While dictionaries of idioms relate the phrase to the phoenix, biblical scholars might think or the passages that talk of “sitting in sackcloth and ashes.” (Esth 4, Job 2, et

al) Since ashes were a sign of mourning, to come out of the ashes would indicate that the reason for mourning no longer existed. Such may be the thought behind some of these songs (perhaps including the one previously mentioned). Because of God’s forgiveness, we no longer mourn over our sins. Because of the greatness of our God, mourning is turned to joy.

That, in fact, is the thought in Isaiah 61:3. “[The Lord has anointed me] To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” The majority of modern English translations use the phrase, “instead of ashes,” which is the accurate meaning. At least one current song, though, speaks of “beauty *from* ashes” instead of “beauty *for* ashes.”

Some might not see a significant difference, but it is there. Isaiah was to give beauty (or a crown or garland) to replace the ashes. When one sat in sackcloth and ashes, one frequently poured ashes on the head. “And Tamar put ashes on her head, and rent her garment of divers colours that was on her.” (2 Sam 13:9) Isaiah contrasts mourning and joy, saying God will replace the one with the other. The song that talks about “beauty from ashes” is stating that even the worst things that happen will result in good. Sometimes bad things happen because of bad choices, and one never sees good come from those choices. While some generic good may come from the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando, the victims and their families may never see specific good results, even if they turn to God for help. The rejoicing that Isaiah promises may replace the sorrow, but there is no guarantee that it will result from that sorrow.

Ashes generally represent mourning. We can choose to arise from the ashes and continue living. We can choose God, and in that choice we can rejoice.

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All Doesn't Always Mean All

Every now and then you may hear someone say, "All means all." It seems a self-evident observation. "Do all things without murmurings and disputings:" (Phil 2:14) We should never murmur about anything, because all means all. "And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him." (Col 3:17) Christians should do nothing that does not bring praise to the Lord; after all, all means all. The problem is that, at least biblically if not practically, all does not always mean all.

"Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord." (Col 3:20) The question has been asked, "But what if my parents forbid me to go to church?" Or worse, "But what if my parents ask me to steal?" Does obey in "all things" extend to every circumstance? Might we not rather use the parallel passage from Ephesians that says, "Children obey your parents in the Lord?" All becomes modified to "all, except."

There is another passage that is often misinterpreted, in which "all" doesn't necessarily mean what many people think it means. After all, "all is not

"Don't get too high and mighty because you had the Law; you couldn't keep it, either."

always all." This passage in Romans 3, though, requires a little background.

Romans 1

Paul writes to the church in Rome because there appears to be a conflict. (Like there has ever been a congregation that didn't have some sort of conflict?) For the Corinthians, which appears to be the most messed up congregation ever, the conflicts were many and varied. For the Roman church, it appears there was only one overriding conflict: ethnic prejudice. The gentile brothers were saying they were better than the Jewish believers because the Law of Moses was imperfect. The Jewish believers were saying they were better because the Hebrews had always been God's chosen people. Paul is saying that he wants to come to Rome, but they need to get their act together, together. He lays his argument out in a long letter, which falls somewhat naturally into the divisions that we have established as chapters.

After a brief introduction, he first addresses the non-Jewish believers. "You should have known better."

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things. (Rom 1:21-23)

The Jewish rabbis talk about the "Noachide Laws." These are laws that were communicated to Noah and, thus, are for all men. They precede the Law of Moses, and constitute the self-evident laws that should be followed by all non-Jews. They are generally considered to be the following seven: Do not deny God. Do not blaspheme God. Do not murder. Do not engage in illicit sexual relations. Do not steal. Do not eat from a live animal. Establish courts/legal system to ensure obedience to said laws. Four of these seven are included in the judgement of the apostles and elders from Jerusalem, as found in Acts 15. In this chapter, Paul includes these, and more, in his indictment of the former life of the non-Jews in the Roman church.

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. (Rom 1:28-32)

They should have known better. Nevertheless, even the non-Jews who did not have the Law of Moses had a law, and sinned anyway.

Romans 2

Having established that the non-Jews came into the church from a sinful state, Paul turns his attention to the Jews. "Don't get too high and mighty because you had the Law; you couldn't keep it, either."

The natural reaction of the Jewish Christians was to judge the others. They were, after all, God's chosen

people. They had the Law of Moses to show them the way to follow God. What they took as an excuse for boasting, however, Paul turned into a reason for sorrow.

Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? (Rom 2:21-23)

Having the Law would only be grounds for boasting if they had been able to keep the Law perfectly. The nature of law, however, is that those who know it are tempted even more to break it. There was a hotel in Florida that was built right on the waterfront. It was so close to the water that the management put signs in every room on that side of the hotel warning, "Please, no fishing from the balconies." The hotel spent thousands of dollars repairing glass balcony doors in the lower rooms, because people were fishing from the upper balconies, and the wind would blow their lead sinkers into the windows and doors below. Then somebody came up with a simple solution: remove the signs prohibiting fishing from the balcony. Once the signs were gone, once the law no longer existed, nobody thought of the possibility of fishing from the balcony. The law (rule) contained in itself the suggestion of the possibility of breaking the rule.

So it was with the Law of Moses. By its nature, and by human nature, nobody could keep it perfectly. There was no cause for boasting because nobody was able to keep the Law. (Later in the letter—Chapter 7—, Paul argues that the Law was not faulty, in itself, but the fault was in this propensity of people.)

Chapter 3—All does not mean All

In the first part of chapter 3, Paul continues his indictment of the Jewish Christians, not just for not obeying the Law of Moses but also for their attitude toward the non-Jewish believers. He points out that the Jews did indeed have an advantage in that they had a direct communication from God. They have an advantage, but are not better for it. "What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin." (Rom 3:9) Toward the end he makes the oft-misinterpreted "all" statement.

But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Rom 3:21-24)

There is no difference, for all have sinned. No difference between whom or what? Who is the "all" that

have sinned? Taking into account everything that Paul has said up to this point, it is obvious that he is saying there is no difference between Jew and gentile. And why is there no difference? Because all have sinned. Taken in this context, "all" is equivalent to "both." All, Jew and gentile, have sinned. Unlike how the passage is commonly used, Paul is not saying that every individual person has sinned. (He saves that until chapter 5.) Yes, when he includes Jew and gentile in "all," this does include every individual, because everyone falls under one or the other of those categories. But in this case he is speaking specifically about categories rather than the individual members of the categories.

Now, someone might think that although they are in one of the guilty classes, it surely must not apply to them because they are an exception. Surely when Adam "gave names to all cattle, and the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field" (Gen 2:20), he didn't name each

The rule contained in itself the suggestion of the possibility of breaking the rule.

individual cow and donkey and seagull. He just named the kind. Here is where Paul uses "all" again, but meaning each individual.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: ... But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. (Rom 5:12, 15)

In the earlier passage, Paul uses "all" to mean all classes of people, though not necessarily all people in those classes. In the later passage he includes all people, regardless of classification. All sons of Adam is pretty inclusive. Nobody can claim to be the exception there. In this case, all does mean all. It is just that this is the verse, rather than the one from chapter 3, that should be quoted to show everyone's guilt.

So all doesn't always mean all. In the Southwestern United States, y'all (you all) actually can mean one person; when talking to a group it is "all y'all." All can mean everything, only as long as it is legal. It can mean every class of people or things, as in Romans 3. It can mean every person or thing, as in Romans 5. It can even leave how much of all open to judgement, as in "all my state shall Tychicus declare unto you." (Col 4:7) (He probably didn't detail every incident of Paul's life.) As in "all" things when it comes to reading the scriptures, we should read carefully to understand "all" the meaning.

The True Root Stock

Luther Burbank was a genius. As a horticulturist, he is credited with the creation of over 300 different varieties of plants, most notably the Shasta daisy and the blight-resistant Burbank potato. Although the term did not exist at the time, and if it had it would not have carried the negative connotations of today, he was one of the masters of creating Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). Rather than working on the molecular level, though, most of his modifications came through time-honored methods such as cross-breeding and grafting. He took these methods to a new level, based on the theories of Charles Darwin, but they had been around for millennia.

Driving along the highways of northern California, one can see rows of strange-looking walnut trees. The lower three or four feet of the trees are almost black, but the upper portions are a light brown. These are English walnuts, grafted onto a black walnut root stock. The native black walnut trees are more disease-resistant, and grow well because they are native to that soil and climate zone. The English walnuts, however, are more desirable for their flavor and softer shell. Grafting is the answer to growing English walnuts in the northern California climate. This is an ancient practice, and was even familiar to the apostle Paul and his readers.

And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not

highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom 11:17-24, KJV [grafted=grafted])

This passage is often used to establish that the church of Christ is “spiritual Israel.” But is that what Paul is truly arguing? The entire letter is written to reconcile Jewish and non-Jewish believers into a new unity, not an old one. God is Burbank trying to create a new fruit.

But what about the passage about grafting? Paul says that Israel became branches “broken off” of the olive tree. The tree, then, was older growth than even Israel. The branches are not the root stock. In chapter 4, Paul declares Abraham to be the root stock. Israel can be grafted in “if they abide not still in unbelief.” That is, whether non-Israel or Israel, the condition for grafting in to the good olive tree is faith.

Gentiles do not have to become Jewish to follow Christ. Jews do not have to become non-Jewish to follow Christ. The faith that grafts one into the church is a matter of trust, not law. We are not “spiritual Israel.” We are the church that was planned before Israel, before Abraham, and before Adam.

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