

The Chaos Ladder

Episode 5 - The Bible is not the problem (The Bible is not God part 2)

[Podcast intro]

Hi, I'm Steve Flowers and you're listening to The Chaos Ladder-- a podcast that explores how the Bible is not a gaping pit waiting to swallow us but a ladder for us to climb.

[Episode intro]

When you look at the Bible's content, one of the words that can be used to describe it is ambiguous. That's not a criticism, just an observation. But there is a reason for that ambiguity, and that reason goes to the core of understanding part of the Bible's nature.

[Main content]

Spirituality is SO much easier when the sacred is clear and enjoyable. But in places the Bible feels confusing, sometimes mixing it with troublesome or unpleasant.

The very beginning of the Bible establishes one of the most confusing things a book of scriptures could do-- the first three chapters of Genesis are not one but two different accounts of how God created the world. And each has a different order of creation-- the first creation story is plants first followed by animals and lastly humans; and in the second story it's the man first followed by plants, animals, and then woman last.¹

Another example where we can get confused-- Many times in the Old Testament God commands the ancient Israelites to completely kill their enemies, including the massacre of women and children, and at times God kills ancient Israel's enemies God's self.² But in the New Testament, Jesus, who is the Son of God, teaches to turn the other cheek and to love your enemies.³

Deuteronomy is one of the Old Testament law books. It states God requires executing justice for orphans, widows, and strangers by providing them food and clothing.⁴ But then later commands public execution for anyone who worships other gods, for children who disobey their parents

¹ Creation story #1 - Genesis 1:1-2:4a (order of creation: plants, animals, and then humans); creation story #2 - Genesis 2:4b-3:24 (order of creation: man, plants, animals, and then woman)

² Exodus 12:29; Deuteronomy 7:1-2; Joshua 8:24-29, 11:10-15; 1 Samuel 15:1-3

³ Matthew 5:38-47

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:12-21

due to gluttony or drunkenness, and for a woman who is not a virgin on her wedding night.⁵ It seems God's law is both compassionate and cruel at the same time.

Paul states in Galatians that "in Christ Jesus you are all children of God" and that as such "there is no longer slave or free."⁶ But fellow New Testament letters of Ephesians, Colossians, and Titus each include instructions for slaves to obey their earthly masters in everything, with Titus adding that slaves "are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God."⁷

There are two very common camps of reaction in Christians today when it comes to scriptures that give us mixed messages or that we find objectionable.

- One camp of Christians looks at these examples and says: "The Bible is sacred but, oh no, it's ambiguous, even blemished or disorderly at times! We need to do something to correct this problem!"
- A second camp of Christians today looks at these same examples and says something similar but reflects their different viewpoint. They say: "The Bible is sacred but, oh no, others may think it looks ambiguous, or even blemished or disorderly! We need to do something to correct this problem!"

Though both camps see the nature of the Bible somewhat differently, their reactions are rooted in the same motivation. Both believe God's nature is orderly and both believe the Bible is closely associated with God, so they assume the Bible should be orderly, too. And if it's perceived as not being so, both camps are concerned that fellow Christians and others may question the Bible's reliability. And that is where both camps find a common motivation-- protecting the Bible's reliability. As such, both camps feel compelled to correct the problem they see by taking it upon themselves to proactively create order out of the Bible's ambiguity. They either add to or redact the Bible's nature to make it soothing and, more importantly, give people confidence in those portions that are ambiguous, difficult, or even objectionable.

And that is where the *real* problem begins. The Bible being ambiguous or even objectionable in places is *not* a problem. The problem is when Christians view passages like that *as a problem* and then feel obligated to defend or make amends for them. I want to spend some time talking about what both camps specifically do to correct this problem, that's actually not a problem, so you'll be able to recognize it when you see it.

Both camps often address this issue by approaching the Bible like it's one massive jigsaw puzzle with thousands of pieces that, by God, they'll put together right so they can make this jumbled mess into an orderly picture that people can depend on.

One way Christians approach this jigsaw puzzle is that they decide to *force* all the pieces to fit together. This is done when they invent measures so make the Bible can look like it's seamless

⁵ Deuteronomy 17:2-5, 21:18-21, and 22:20-21.

⁶ Galatians 3:26-28

⁷ Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22; Titus 2:9-10

with no rough edges. This is typically done by creating rationalizations, exceptions, or what are called harmonizations. Here's some examples of each type:

- Some of the early Protestants didn't practice the gifts of prophecy, healing and speaking in tongues, which are described in Acts and which Paul lists in his letters as spiritual gifts. They felt obligated to explain why those spiritual gifts are no longer practiced (since they didn't practice them). So they invented an exception. Invented answer? The spiritual gifts of prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues were limited to the Apostolic age meaning those gifts and practices were only available from the Holy Spirit as long as the original Apostles were alive. That's a real doctrine called Cessationism that many Protestants still believe today.
- Here's one more example of how some Christians decide to force the Bible's puzzle pieces to fit together where there are variances, or even contradictions, between the same story or teaching being told in different books. One example of such a textual variance is in the Gospels where Peter denies to others that he knows Jesus after Jesus was arrested. It contains a very small contradiction but this story is often cited as an example when discussing topics such as this. The Gospel of Mark states that Peter denied knowing Jesus a total of three times-- once before the first cock crow and then twice more before the second crow.⁸ The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John also state that Peter denied knowing Jesus three times but all three state that all three denials transpired before the cock crowed at all.⁹ So how do you solve textual variances like this? You get your pick between two invented answers to force these puzzle pieces to fit together.
 - The first option is what is called a harmonization. It's an invented device that does just what it sounds like-- it blends all the elements together so they sound good together. In this example of Peter's denials, you harmonize the accounts to make all the numbers relevant by saying Peter actually denied Jesus a total of 6 times-- Peter denied knowing Jesus 3 times well before the cock crowed which covers Matthew, Luke and John, and then once again right before the first crow, and then twice more before the second crow which covers Mark. Now none of the passages are incorrect.
 - The other option used to cover textual differences in the same story or known inaccuracies is an example of a rationalization. I will add that this one is a fairly popular one today which can be found online in the stated beliefs of a number of churches. The explanation is that any errors in the Bible are due to mistakes made by the early scribes who made copies for prosperity sake of the original manuscripts written by the biblical authors themselves. They would say that the original manuscripts didn't have any contradictions or errors. The differences in something like the telling of Peter's denials is because a scribe screwed up when they copied the original. You might think, "Well, that actually sounds very

⁸ Mark 14:66-72

⁹ Matthew 26:69-75; Luke 22:54-62; John 15:15-18, 25-27

plausible. How's that an invented answer?" It's invented because *none*, as in zero, of the original manuscripts for *any* of the books of the Bible exist. So we can't compare them to the oldest manuscript copies that we *do* have. Before I leave this example, I want to note one more thing about this rationalization since it's so pervasive today-- embracing it implies a serious pitfall. Since we don't have the original manuscripts but we acknowledge there are mistakes in the copies we do have, how do we know all the other passages in the Bible that are *not* in conflict with each other (which is most all of the Bible) were correctly copied? Couldn't the Bible be riddled with mistakes that change the meaning of the text?

All right, going back to the jigsaw puzzle analogy--

Those were all ways the first camp uses to force the jigsaw puzzle pieces together. The other way to make the whole puzzle look right is used by the other camp of Christians. Instead of forcing all the pieces to fit together they just simply discard those pieces they don't like. Christians in this camp produce orderliness primarily by making sure the Bible is not objectionable. They do this by ignoring or explaining away those passages deemed offensive or uncomfortable. But this does not account for the Bible as a whole. And the pitfall for *this* group is they often end up reducing the Bible to a select list of ethical guidelines, effectively making it just another self-help book.

So one camp invents measures to make all the ambiguous puzzle pieces fit together while the other camp just tosses out those pieces they deem objectionable. Both think they're doing this to help the Bible be reliable in what it teaches. But I believe the efforts of both camps are actually serving to remake the Bible to fit their own preconceived image of God. One camp needs the Bible to be perfect and seamless because that's how they see God. So they add inventions to make it seem that way. The other camp needs the Bible to be all loving with no objections because that's how they see God. So they ignore or just cut out the parts that don't fit into that model.

Ultimately, both camps are consumed by wanting their Bible to be exactly how they see God. Last episode I discussed guarding against seeing the Bible as something God wrote or dictated. Similarly, we have to guard against feeling compelled to ensure the written words of the Bible fit our image of God. Because the Bible is not God.

But here's the kicker-- there's a third camp of Christians when it comes to all the ambiguous and objectionable passages in the Bible. This third camp looks at the Bible for exactly what it is, warts and all, and just decides to accept it as is and work from there as to why it is that way. I believe this is the healthiest and more humble way to approach scripture. We can admit that the Bible's content *is* at face value ambiguous in contrast with parts of itself when isolated from each other. But as a whole, any ambiguity is *not* an indicator that the Bible as a whole is *disorderly* anymore than anyone who has grown, changed, and matured as a person has lived a disorderly life. Let me explain that--

Steve at 57 looks at life and God a little differently than Steve at 40 and Steve at 40 looked at those things a little differently than Steve at 30 and so on. Probably most anyone with a few decades under their belt can identify with that. If I had a book of how Steve at 20 looked at life and God and another one with how Steve at 57 looked at those same things, they would make belief statements that both align and are very different, even contradictory at times. But I wouldn't conclude that my life was ambiguous or disorderly, because I know that Steve at 57 was simply the product of all the preceding Steve's. Good, bad, or otherwise, who we are today is the product of our previous selves.

The Bible should be looked at similarly. Because here's the trick with the jigsaw puzzle analogy I've been using. A common problem between the first two camps is that both look at the Bible as one jigsaw puzzle. But it isn't. When we let the Bible be what it is, this third camp comes to realize that the Bible is actually a bunch of different jigsaw puzzles from all the faith-journeys it echoes and writes of. They're just all dumped into the same puzzle box we call the Bible. These myriad of faith-journey puzzles cover close to a thousand years, so, yeah, we're going to see ambiguity. But that ambiguity is a product of where those journeys differed in their understanding of God. God does not need us to apologize, correct, cover up, or make amends for anything in the Bible. Instead, God is calling us to listen-- listen to the many voices of ancient Israelites and Early Christians, attempting to share God's revelation, as best they could, in light of their own experiences and settings.

Any archaic references, contradictions, or troublesome passages in our Bible are not an argument for the Bible's unreliability or an invitation to insert ourselves into the Bible's nature by enhancing where we think it needs help. Any perceived issues we think the Bible may have are in fact all points of interest for us to engage in a deeper understanding of exactly how the Bible is inspired. Because it's an inspiration that is slowly revealed through every piece of the Bible's jigsaw puzzles.

I've met people who hate the phrase "it is what it is." I'm not one of them. It's one of my go-to's because the nature or inevitability of some things need to be accepted for what they are. Likewise, the Bible just is what *it* is. And as such, the Bible is ambiguous when we isolate its passages from one another. But it's this ambiguity that adds to its sacredness as the record of an inspired journey seeking to more fully reveal who God is and what God desires. Hopefully that idea will become a little more transparent in the topics I'll be covering over the next several episodes.

Before I close, a quick admin reminder since I've referenced a lot of scripture without saying the specific citations-- There's an essay version on the StoriesFromAVillage.org web page for each episode and you can find the scripture citations in the footnotes for each essay.

Thanks for listening to The Chaos Ladder. Hope you'll join me next time. Take care.

[Outro statement]

The Chaos Ladder is part of StoriesFromAVillage.org, a podcast and essay ministry of Stone Village Church in Columbus, Ohio. You can find a transcript of this podcast on the web site.
