

# (1 Peter - Part 29): False Teaching on Obscure Teaching

by A.W. Tozer

---

*The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding difficult texts in the Bible and avoiding false teaching and heresy.*

**Duration:** 34:43

**Scripture:** Genesis 6:3, Matthew 11:28, Mark 7:37, Ephesians 4:8, Hebrews 9:27, 1 Peter 3:18, 1 Peter 4:6

**Topics:** "False Teaching"

---

## Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of salvation and the role of baptism in it. He emphasizes that very few people were saved in the past, highlighting the importance of having a good conscience towards God. The preacher also mentions the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ascension into heaven, where he has authority over angels and powers. He then explains that Christ preached to the spirits in prison, who were alive in their spirit but had sinned in the flesh and were to be judged. The preacher supports his points with references to Ephesians 4:8-10 and the story of the flood in the Bible.

---

## Transcript

The last three days of this year, that would be December 28th, 29th, and 30th, I expect to be one of the preachers, and from the looks of the program, they've given me a tremendous amount to do. And speaking to the... Honestly, I don't know that I even know the name of the organization, but they meet in Illinois University for what's that group? Foreign Missions Fellowship. And they tell me there are thousands come, they come from all over the United States and Canada.

And I'm going with a good deal of fear and trembling. It seems the Lord always keeps me on tender hooks, never lets me go with any confidence. Last week, I was complaining to Brother McAfee that I had to go and speak at a conference of Brethren in Christ, and I didn't know them.

And I was to speak to the publication board hour and the Sunday School hour and the Christian education hour. And I didn't know anything about any of those subjects. Brother McAfee said, Your invariable custom is to worry about it before you get there and then come back and report a glowing experience.

I said, when I came back, I guess I fell in line with your prediction. But we had a most wonderful time at Messiah College at Grantham, Pennsylvania, Brethren in Christ. Incidentally, this hymn book is their hymn

book, and I had a hard time making the publication secretary of the Christian Missionary Alliance, who was present there by one of the guests, understand why we were using this instead of our own Alliance symbol.

But I don't know when I had been with a fellowship that was sweeter, more cordial. Some of those dear old brothers would merely shake my hand off my shoulder, telling me how they appreciated my simple talks. And they were plain dressers, plain livers, simple people.

And I didn't know there were people like that left in the world. But I was very happy to find it out. The women's hairdress was simple, pulled back and tied behind with a little white hat on, and they looked surprisingly neat and beautiful.

I told them that the way the women wear their hair now, all of these women, they had their ears. And I said, I had forgotten in twenty-five years, I had forgotten women had ears. But I was delighted to find they still had ears.

And they are lovely people. I enjoyed it immensely. I expect to enjoy the time down at the University of Illinois.

But being who I am, I suppose I'll worry a little about it until the time comes for me to get down there. Now we are continuing in 1 Peter, and I am trying to be honest and teach all of it, and not do like the commentaries do, skip the hard places. This that I bring to you today is a hard passage of scripture.

Peter might very well have had himself in mind when he said that Paul was in the habit of writing things very hard to be understood, in which the unstable and the unlearned rested it to their own destruction. Paul said, Peter said that about Paul, but he might have said it about himself, because he did give us something very difficult here. Let me read it.

Verse 18 of chapter 3. For Christ also hath once suffered four sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit, by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in the prison, which sometimes were disobedient when once the longsuffering of God was in the days of Noah. While the ark of God was a prepared, very few of his eight souls were saved by water. The life-signal were in communion and baptism, that also now save us, not the communion of the present flesh, but the answer to good conscience for God, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is in the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto him.

Verse 6 of chapter 4. For for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the Spirit. Now, verses 21 and 22, where it tells us about baptism, being a figure and good conscience toward God and the resurrection of Christ. Verse 22, it tells us of Christ's ascension and his high place of authority over angels and powers.

These I am not going to mention in as much as we have dealt with this quite fully. So I am to speak about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison, verse 6, that are dead. And I will say that there is more in this, this morning, for the curious than there is for the spiritually hungry.

But I am still not going to pass it up for a number of reasons. One is that the passages here, by divine inspiration, and as it had not been intended that we should expound it, or attempt to expound it, or attempt to understand it, it would not have been put here. There are obscure passages in the scripture, but even

those obscure passages were divinely inspired and for that reason need to be treated with respect, even if we are not able fully to understand it.

The second reason that I am going to courageously attempt an exposition here is that I want our people to be fully informed. We cannot be informed fully if we skip the hard places. And there is no joy in the scriptures that can be understood.

And third, and I think this is the most important of the three, that false teachers specialize on difficult texts. Heresy always thrives in obscurity, or on obscure passages, and dies when the full light of God reaches it. Let us take such a passage as 1 Corinthians, where it talks about the baptizing for the dead.

Now, it tells us there that, verse 29, "...else what shall we do that shall baptize for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?" Now, Paul put that there, and nobody knows exactly what is meant by it. And certainly he did not approve it. He only used it casually as an argument point for a future life.

But there are those who practice baptism for the dead. And if you object to it as being unscriptural, they quote you that obscure and difficult passage from 1 Corinthians 15. And they say, why would you object when there were those in Corinth that baptized for the dead? So they make a whole doctrine to rest upon one verse.

Let me give you a good working rule for the understanding of scripture. If you haven't more than one verse to support it, don't teach it. Because if it isn't found in more than one verse of the Bible, then chances are it isn't found there either.

And that what you think is a passage teaching a certain thing, does not teach it at all. Now, suppose that I were going to argue for the future life, and I were writing to people who practice masses for the dead. And I were to say to them, how can you deny the future life when you practice, say, mass for the dead? I would be saying to them, in effect, now you yourself admit a future life because you are acting as though those persons who had died were still in existence.

Therefore, you yourself believe in a future life, and your very practice of saying masses proves it. But that wouldn't mean that I approved saying masses for the dead. It would only show that I was arguing that they believed in a future life by the fact that they attempted to help people in the future life.

Now, that's all Paul meant here. Paul did not in any wise practice baptism for the dead, nor did he exhort anybody to do it. There is that one line in the Bible that teaches it.

But he appeals to something that already some of them at least did and believed to show how inconsistent they were in saying that there was no resurrection. And it's obvious that the same persons who said there was no resurrection were the same ones who practiced baptism for the dead. And then take that famous passage, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Now, that's obviously an obscure passage. I have never heard it satisfactorily explained. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.

Whatever you open will stay open. Whatever you enclose will be closed. Now, isn't it clear that our Roman Catholic friends will deny that the Bible has any authority over the Church on the grounds that the Bible came out of the Church and not the Church out of the Bible? And they will deny whole sections of scripture

because they say, well, you don't understand it, and besides that it isn't binding upon us because the Bible is the daughter of the Church and not the Church the daughter of the Bible.

Therefore, the Bible has no authority over the Church. But if you complain that the Pope is not Christ's vicegerent on earth, they will run to that obscure passage, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom, and they'll say, how dare you deny the Bible. Well, the Bible says, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom, and that was Peter and this Pope is a descendant of Peter.

I don't know how we get that way, but false teaching always hunts an obscure passage, always hunts an obscure passage, which reminds me of the Mormon missionary that was traveling and somebody said, you believe in a plurality of lives, how do you deal with that passage that says, let a bishop be the husband of one wife? He said, that means at least one. He had it explained anyhow. Well, heresy always hunts obscurity, and false teaching always hunts the difficult taste.

You see, my brethren, it is like if I were to take you to my farm, if I had a farm, and I would say to you, now here you will find apples and peaches and grapes, and here are watermelons and cantaloupes and sweet potatoes, and I would name 15 or 20 edible fruits or vegetables or grains and say, now this is all yours, take over. And I would come back a month later and find my guests half-starved, and when I would say to them, what's the matter, you look undernourished, they would say, well, we are undernourished, because we have found a plant that we can't identify. There is a plant behind the old oak stump, back there near the end of the far field, just over the hill, and we have spent one month trying to identify this plant.

But I would say, you are starving, you look sick, you will get TB. What's the matter with you? And they would say, well, we are worried about this one verse, this one plant. And that's exactly what a lot of God's children do.

They starve themselves to death, knee-deep in toil, because there is one little old plant back of a stump in the rear end of the field that they can't identify. And heretics always starve you to death, while they worry you to death about that one obscure passage of scripture. So I'm going to leaf out this passage, and let nobody come and worry you with it, and say that they know what it means, and therefore try to prove that you are wrong.

Now, what this verse doesn't teach, or these verses do not teach, they do not teach universalism. We know universalism is the belief in the restitution of all fallen beings to a state of blessedness. Some of them believe only in the restoration of all human beings to blessedness, not only Christians, but all human beings finally to blessedness.

Then there is another kind of more exhaustive universalism, which teaches not only the restitution of all human beings, but the devil and all the fallen angels. They're very generous in taking everything, every human and every creature that has fallen and sinned against God. Now, this is a dream born of desire.

And this universalism, the teaching that every moral creature would finally be saved, is a dream born of desire. And it springs from humanitarian motives, no doubt. Humanitarian themes, within the best, lead us to desire the salvation of all.

But it is not taught in the scriptures. The Bible specifically states, that except the repentant shall all likewise perish. And it pictures us of how good the devil and his angels are, and how all that are not found in the book of life are finally consigned.

So the teaching of the Bible is definitely not universalism. And whatever this passage teaches, which I have already been hearing, it does not teach universalism. And second, it does not teach a second chance.

Now, the Russellites, I do not call them the holy witnesses, because I do not want to soil that holy name by identifying it with any false teacher. But the Russellites teach that there is a second chance. They say that everybody that dies will have a chance in the future world.

And then, if he turns down that chance, he will be annihilated. He will cease to be. When a sinner dies, he sleeps in the earth, body and soul, in a state of deep unconsciousness.

And then, when the resurrection comes, he will be raised and given another chance. If he turns down that chance, then he will be annihilated and cease to be, and there will be no hell. Now, that is what the Russellites teach.

And of course, they will hold up in passages like this. But this arrow flies on difficult texts. It cannot stand the full bright light of the Bible.

It cannot stand the teachings of Jesus. It cannot stand the book of Romans. It cannot stand the book of Hebrews.

It cannot stand the book of Revelation. It cannot stand the four Gospels. And this harassment cannot possibly stand up under all the light of the Bible.

It is a night-blooming plant, and blooms in the shadows of human thought. But as soon as we turn the whole Bible loose on it, it withers and dies. Now, what it does mean? It means that there are lost souls.

There is a scripture called, spirits in prison, then there are dead. And some of these in the passage are identified as being the earth's population at the time of Noah's flood. They heard the message preached, and they denied or refused it, rejected it, and the result was that they perished along with their evil deeds at the coming of the flood.

And it teaches us that these all went to the place of the dead. Hades in the New Testament, Noah in the Old, the place of the dead, and that Christ's body when he died lay three days in Joseph's new tomb. But that his spirit was not in his body, but separated temporarily from his body, and in that spirit he went and preached to the spirits that were in Hades, the spirits in prison.

You remember the Apostles' Creed, that we used to quote it around here sometimes, but we sort of quit, we all believe in the Apostles' Creed. It says this about our Lord, that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and the third day he arose again from the dead. Now, that's the way we Protestants had it.

But the old Apostles' Creed reads like this, that Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried, and descended into Hades, and the third day he arose again from the dead. Now, that is only saying what Peter said here, and what Paul said, as we'll notice later. That when Jesus Christ's spirit was freed from the crucified body, that spirit did not like coercing, or to hover over the tomb.

Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, in his spirit, had a work to do, and so the work he had to do was to go, descend in the air, that is, descend not into the fires of hell for punishment, but descend to the place of the dead, and there preach the word to those that had died, and whose spirits were confined there. So he preached the psalmist of Noah's position, and he told them why judgment had come, and he justified the ways of God to man, and explained what had taken place, in order that they might know that they were being treated as intelligent beings. Always remember, brethren, that God treats every human being as an intelligent being.

You may not be as bright as Einstein, but you're morally intelligent, and God will never violate your intelligence, and he never means that you should simply shut your eyes and gulp and swallow what's ever given to you. He means that you're an intelligent, moral being, and therefore he will not violate your intelligence, nor will he treat you like a moral. There's a certain healing evangelist who goes up and down the country, and when anybody comes, he says they feel they've got a demon in them, and he wants to pray for the demon of God.

He tells everybody in the congregation, now don't you open your eyes and look, for if you do, the demon will go on you. That kind of intimidation, that kind of trickery. Why, the average magician who does tricks for money on a stage wouldn't be so cheap that if Jesus Christ is casting out devils and healing the sick, I don't dare look lest the demon will jump on me.

Where do you find that in your Bible? Where is that in the New Testament? Where is that any place within the confines of the word of God? Nowhere. That's cheap trickery. And I'd have no hesitation to look in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, I never did anything in a corner. I never did anything with people's eyes shut. I never had to do anything in a house.

All religious activity should be an open book. Everything from the treasures receipt book up and down the scale in the Church of Christ should be open to the eyes of mankind. There's never any place in the Bible where God prints me as if I didn't have good sense.

So that even the spirits that were in prison, the those who died and are in the place of the dead, our Lord went to them in his spirit and preached to them and explained how to inquire in order that justice might be done. You take an ordinary English or American court, something like this goes on. The evidence has been heard.

The jury goes out and deliberates. They come back in. They pronounce the defendant guilty.

And the judge says, will the defendant please rise and face the court? The defendant rises and the judge says something to this effect. Mr. Swansall, the evidence has been heard and a jury of your peers have decided from the evidence that you have been guilty of such and such a crime. Before you are sentenced, is there anything you want to say? In other words, we're about to sentence you, but we're not advocating your intelligence.

We're not treating you like a robot. You are an intelligent human being, and you're able to judge us, and if we as a judge enjoy along you, you judge us. Therefore, I want to clear this whole matter up.

Have you anything to say? Usually they don't have. But if there was anything that this intelligent sinner could say to the judge, the judge would give it respectful consideration. For in theory at least, American

and English courts are not going to roll your name to the electric chair of a prison.

They're going to do it according to the rule of justice, with all the gears showing and all the processes open before the eyes of mankind. So God says that all the wicked will be swept away by a flood and hurled to the place of the dead, and they will never see the blessedness of heaven or know God. But we're not simply going to swoop them out as if there were no bits of proof.

They're human, they're intelligent, they're moral creatures. They're capable of exercising judgment on their own right. Therefore, the everlasting Son of God went before the spirits in prison and preached to them there, preached to them that they were living, and because they were spirits they were alive in their spirit.

They had sinned in the flesh, and they were to be judged for the days they lived in the flesh, and their whole house was owed in to the judgment of God. Now, my brethren, if you don't believe this, let me give you some scripture. It shows why Christ descended into the place of the dead, into hell, as it says.

Ephesians 4, 8 to 10. Turn to that if you will for a moment. It says, Therefore he said, when Christ descended upon high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men.

Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all things that he might feel. All heavens that he might feel all things. We are told here that when Jesus Christ's body lay in the grave, his spirit went to those captives in the place of the dead, and preached the release to them.

And when he arose, he took with him all the redeemed spirits of the lonesome men that had been shot in the place of the dead. Here it is. You remember Jacob said, I will go down unto Sheol, Hades, down unto Sheol, mourning for my son.

And when Samuel, the dead man, came back from the dead, he came up out of the earth. But after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and after Christ had taken the redeemed ones with him to heaven, to the place of paradise, Paul said, I was caught up in the paradise to the third heaven, was no longer down but up. The Lord himself, the Lord of life and death, had taken his ransomed ones out of the place of the dead.

But that place of the dead contained not only the redeemed ones, but it contained also those that were not redeemed. Separated, however, by a gulf, a great gulf that was fixed. Lazarus and the rich man explained that.

When the rich man died, he went to the place of the dead. And when Lazarus died, he went to the place of the dead, this time Abraham's bosom, with a great gulf fixed between. So when our Lord descended after his death, he descended into Hades, he took all in Abraham's bosom with him up to heaven, and left the rest there.

But in doing it, he explained it and preached in the spirit to all those that were in the place of the dead. Now, if that isn't enough, let me give you Philippians 3, 9 and 11. Therefore God also hath highly exalted Jesus, and given him a name which is above every name, that upon him of Jesus every knee should bow, for things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth.

And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. So that not only those in heaven and those on earth, but those in hell are forced to confess with their tongue that Jesus Christ is Lord, and this they do to the glory of God the Father. So you see, my brethren, that

passage that Peter gives us here doesn't teach universalism.

It teaches only that Jesus Christ our Lord, while his body lay in the grave, went in the spirit to shield the place of the dead, and there he preached deliverance to the ransomed, and in judgment to the lost, took his ransom down to him, and left the lost to the judgment of the great day. But everyone, those under the earth and those on the earth, and all creatures everywhere, admit that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. This Jesus Christ our Lord is not going to rule over any that do not willingly submit to his rule.

He will not enforce his rule over one human being, or one moral creature, but he will force from the unwilling tongues of even lost ones the fact that he is right, true and righteous are thy judgments, O Lord. It will be the only text in hell. The only text in hell, and I'm not sure it won't be cut against the tablatures of that terrible place.

True and righteous are thy judgments, O Lord. In order that that might be known to all the three worlds above and on the earth and beneath, there had to be a declaration of the whole just plan of God, those that are dead as well as those that live. But there is not one sentence, not one phrase, not one word, not one letter in the Bible that teaches that Jesus ever preached the gospel to the dead.

He said, come unto me. He said, come unto me to the living. But he never preached the gospel of redemption and gave an invitation and said, come! It is appointed unto men once to die and after that to judge.

The preaching to the dead was done in order that the dead as well as the living, the lost as well as the saved, might know how true and just and righteous our God is. And how impeccable is his character, how holy are his ways, and that he doeth all things well. I admit that this is not the kind of a message to send you out with moist eyes, but you need to hear this and you need to know this, so the next time someone comes pushing your doorbell with a phonograph record to play to you, you will be able to smile and say, I know what the Bible teaches, thank you, good-bye.

Quietly close. Never slam it. Don't slam it, that's not nice.

Christians never slam doors. But close it rather crisply, I would suggest. Because the false teachers are growing and their numbers are growing, they're leaps and bounds.

Last month we had in Chicago our fifty-seventh annual missionary council. We had how many? Eleven hundred? About eleven hundred of us. That summer when I was preaching at Keswick out in the east, we were held up forty-five minutes getting through Lincoln Tunnel.

You know why? The traffic was so heavy on the road. You know why it was so heavy on the road? Jehovah's Witnesses were gathering at Yankee Stadium. One hundred thousand strong.

After fifty-seven years of missionary enterprise, we got eleven hundred. They had one hundred thousand present. So you need to know these things, even if they don't bless you.

At the time. So you have a shield of truth to raise against the fiery darts of error. Father, bless thy word, and pray thee that thou wilt help us to see how wondrous are thy good in our way past finery, to receive with bowed heads and reverent minds, to hide obscured things as well as the easy-cleaning things.

We thank thee, Lord, that the easy-cleaning things outnumber the others perhaps a thousand to one.  
Bless thou the word given this morning, for Jesus' sake, amen.

---

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/2/SID2082.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/aw-tozer/1-peter-part-29-false-teaching-on-obscure-teaching/>

# *Grow in Your Walk with Christ*

---

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

**[www.sermonindex.net](http://www.sermonindex.net)**