

False Teaching on Obscure Teaching

by A.W. Tozer

A.W. Tozer's sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding obscure biblical passages to combat false teachings and affirm God's justice.

Scripture: 1 Peter 3:18

Topics: "False Teaching", "Understanding Scripture"

Description

A.W. Tozer addresses the dangers of false teachings that arise from obscure passages in Scripture, emphasizing the importance of understanding difficult texts rather than avoiding them. He warns that heresies often exploit these challenging verses, leading believers astray, and encourages a thorough examination of all Scripture to combat such errors. Tozer explains that Christ preached to the spirits in prison, clarifying that this does not support universalism or a second chance after death, but rather affirms God's justice and the finality of judgment. He urges the congregation to be informed and vigilant against false teachings that thrive in obscurity.

Transcript

"False Teaching on Obscure Teaching"

Preached by A. W. Tozer in Chicago, Illinois, on June 13, 1954.

The last three days of this year--that would be December 28, 29, and 30--I expect to be one of the preachers, and from the looks of the program, they've given me a tremendous amount to do, I'm speaking to the--honestly, I don't know that I even know the name of the organization, but they meet in Illinois University. What's that group? Foreign Missions Fellowship. They tell me there are thousands come, and 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 puts me on tender hooks, never lets me go with any confidence. Last week, I was complaining to Brother MacAfee 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 through 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 MacAfee 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, for we had a most wonderful time at Messiah College at Grantham, Pennsylvania."

Brethren in Christ; incidentally, this hymnbook is their hymnbook, and I had a hard time making the Publication Secretary of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, who was present there by one of the guests, understand why we were using this instead of our own Alliance hymnal. But I don't know when I have been with a fellowship that was sweeter, more cordial--some of those dear old, bearded brothers would nearly shake my hand off my shoulder, telling me how they appreciated my simple talk--and they're plain dressers, plain livers, simple people. I didn't know there were people like that left in the world, but I'm very happy to find it out. The women's hair dress is simple, pulled back and tied behind, and the little white hat on, and they look surprisingly neat and beautiful. I told them that, the way the women wear their hair now, all of these--cocker spaniel hair down here--they hide 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 and 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 First Peter, and I'm 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 wrested it to their own destruction. 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 once for 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 prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark of God was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ: Who is gone into heaven, and is on 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 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 inasmuch [there's no doubt that is]* quite clear. So, I am to speak about Christ preaching to the spirits in prison, or, verse 6, "them 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 passage is here by divine inspiration, and if 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 them. Now, 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--or major only in the Scripture that can be understood. And, third, and I think this is the more import--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 First Corinthians, where it talks about the baptizing for the dead. Now, it tells us there, that, "else," verse 29, "else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead then 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 arguing point for a future life. But there 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 First Corinthians 15, and they say, "why would you object to 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, the chances are it isn't found there, either, and that what you think is a passage preaching 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 saying 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 has 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 approve 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, nor is there one line in the Bible that teaches it. But he appeals to something they already (some of them, at least) did, and believed, to show them how inconsistent they were in saying that there is no resurrection. And it's obvious that the same persons who said there were no--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 and whatever you open will stay open and whatever you close will be closed.' Now, isn't it queer 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 will 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 vice Peter on earth, they will run to that obscure passage, I will give unto you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and say, "How dare you deny the Bible? Why 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 wives; how do you deal with that passage that says, let a bishop should be the husband of one wife?" He said, "That means 'at least one.'" He had it explained, anyhow.

Well, a heresy always hunts obscurity, and false teaching always hunts the difficult text. You see, my brethren, it is like if I were to take you to my farm, if I had a farm, and I were to 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 fifteen or twenty 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 guest 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 in the--near the end of the far field, just over yonder hill, and we have spent one month trying to identify this plant." But I would say, "You're starving! You'll get sick! You'll--get T. B.! What's the matter with you?" They would say, "Well, we're 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 prayer, because there's one little old, 'back of the 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 [brief] out this passage, in order that nobody will come and worry you with it, and say they know what it means, and therefore try to prove that you're wrong.

Now. What this verse doesn't teach, or these verses do not teach: they do not teach universalism. You 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 moral-exhaustive universalism, which teaches not only the restitution of all human beings, but the devil and all the fallen angels. They're very generous and take in everything, every [believer], 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 feelings [willing to bless] lead us to desire the salvation of all. But it is not taught in the Scriptures. The Bible specifically states that except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish. And it pictures us a Hell, where the devil and his angels are, and 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 read in your hearing, it does not teach universalism.

And second, it does not teach a second chance. Now, the Russellites--I do not call them Jehovah's Witnesses because I do not want to soil that holy name by identifying it with any false teachers. But the Russellites teach that there is a second chance. They say everybody who 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 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's what the Russellites teach, and of course they were holed-up in passages like this. But this error thrives 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. This heresy 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, which the Scriptures call "spirits in prison;" men that 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, Sheol in the Old--the place of the

dead--and that Christ's body, when he died, [rode] 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 Apostle's Creed, that we--used to quote it around here sometimes but we sort of quit--we all [believed] in the Apostle's Creed. It says this about our Lord: that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born to the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilot, 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 Apostle's Creed reads like this: that Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilot, 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 lie quiescent, or 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 into Hell. That is, descend not into the fires of Hell as the 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. And so he preached the soundness 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 are an intelligent, moral being, and therefore he will not violate your intelligence! Nor will he treat you like a moron!

There's a certain healing evangelist that goes up and down the country, and when anybody comes he says they've got a demon in them, and he wants to pray for the demon to go out. 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 devil with him healing the sick, I don't dare look lest the demon would jump on me? Where do you find that in your Bible? Where's 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 hide. All religious activity should be an open book. Everything from the treasures we seek book, up and down the scale in the church of Christ should be open to the eyes of mankind.

And there's never any place in the Bible where God treats me as if I didn't have good sense. So that even the spirits that were in prison, even those who died and are in the place of the dead, our Lord went to them in spirit, and preached to them, and explained how things were, 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. So-and-so, 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 abnegating your intelligence. We're not treating you like a robot. You are an intelligent human being, and you are able to judge us, and if we as a judge and jury are wrong, you, you [will] judge us. Therefore we want to clear this whole matter up. Have you anything to say?" Usually they don't have, but is 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 railroad a man to the electric chair or to prison. They're going to do it according to the rules of justice, with all the rules showing, and all the processes open before the eyes of mankind.

So God says that all the wicked were swept away by a flood and hurled to the place of the dead, and will never see the blessedness of heaven or know God. But we're not simply going to sweep them out as if they were [inert -?-], or filth. 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 though 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] said amen to the judgment of God.

Now, my brethren, if you don't believe this, let me give you some scriptures. To show why Christ descended into the place of the dead, and into Hell as it says, Ephesians 4:8-10. Turn to that, if you will, for a moment. It says, 'wherefore he saith, when Christ ascended up on 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 heavens, that he might fill 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 to the least of them, and when he rose, he took with him all the redeemed spirits of ransomed men that had been shut in the place of the dead, Hades. 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 into paradise, to the third heaven'--was no longer down, but up! The Lord of life himself, the Lord of life and glory, 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 great gulf, a 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 his Spirit to all those that were in the place of the dead.

Now, if that isn't enough, let me give you Philippians 2:9, and 11: 'wherefore God also hath highly exalted Jesus and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of 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 Sheol, the place of the dead, and there he preached deliverance to the ransomed, and judgment to the lost, took his ransomed [out] with him and left the lost for the judgment of the great day. That everyone who was under the earth and [goes] 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 readily submit to his rule.

He will not enforce his rule over one human being, or one moral creature, but he will course from the unwilling founts of even lost ones the fact that he's right. "True and righteous are thy judgments, O Lord" will be the only text in hell. The only text in hell, and I'm not sure it won't be cut against the entablatures of that terrible place, "True and righteous are they judgments, O Lord." In order that that might be known to all the free wills above and on the earth and beneath, there had to be a declaration of the whole, just plan of God, to those that are dead as well as those that live. But there is no 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 and said "Come unto me." He said, 'Come unto me to the living,' but he never preached a gospel of redemption and gave invitation and said, "Come." It is appointed unto men once to die, and after that the judgment. 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.

Now 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 we needed to know this so the next time someone comes pushing your doorbell with a phonograph record to play to you, you'll be able to smile and say, "I know what the Bible teaches, thank you. Goodbye." 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; their numbers are growing by leaps and bounds.

Last month we had in Chicago our 57th annual missionary council. We had how many, eleven hundred? About eleven hundred of us. Last summer, when I was teaching at [---] out in the east, we were held up 45 minutes getting through Lincoln Tunnel. You know why? The traffic was so heavy on the road, and do you know why it was so heavy on the road? "Jehovah's Witnesses" were gathering at Yankee Stadium. One hundred thousand strong! After 57 years of missionary enterprise, we get 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 shrewd truth to raise against the fiery darts of error.

Father, bless thy word, we pray thee that thou wilt help us to see how wondrous are thy judgments, and [thy] way past finding out, to receive with bowed heads and reverent minds the hard, obscure things as well as the easy, plain things. And we thank you, Lord, that the easy, plain things outnumber the others, perhaps a thousand to one. Bless thou the word given this morning for Jesus' sake. Amen.

*Note: words enclosed in brackets represent reasonable guesses about inaudible content, but may be inaccurate.

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