

# Difficult Passages- Lake Geneva conf.1984 - Part 3

by William MacDonald

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*The sermon discusses difficult passages in Scripture, including the compartment theory in 1 Peter 3 and the meaning of 'lead captivity captive' in Ephesians 4, and emphasizes the importance of leaving elementary principles and avoiding apostasy.*

**Duration:** 40:55

**Scripture:** Hebrews 5:11-13

**Topics:** "Conference"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker begins by discussing the background of the passage they will be reading from. They refer to the previous chapter, chapter 5, where the writer expresses frustration with the Jewish people for being dull of hearing and still focused on the elementary principles of religion. The speaker uses an analogy of a wife talking to a picture of her husband even though he is already home to illustrate this point. The speaker then explains that the Old Testament was like playing with blocks, where God was teaching Israel basic principles, but now with the full revelation of Jesus, they need to move on to maturity in the Christian life. The sermon also references Ephesians 4 and Psalm 139 to further explain certain expressions and concepts.

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## Transcript

Before we go to today's passage, I'd like to just add a little postscript to last night. We were really pressed for time, and several questions have been raised about that expression in 1 Peter 3. He went and preached to the spirit in prison. I mentioned that I believe that that refers to the Lord Jesus preaching through Noah to the men of Noah's day, who rejected the message and are now in prison.

However, there is the other view known as the compartment theory. That's good, I call that one a theory. I never use that word, theory, of my own.

But there is this compartment theory that at the time of the Lord Jesus' death, Sheol, or Hades, was divided into two compartments, the saved and the unsaved, and that at the time of his death, the Lord Jesus went to Sheol and emptied the saved compartment and took those people home to heaven. I believe that in the Old Testament, the saints went directly to heaven, not to Sheol. Well, it raises a question because in Ephesians chapter 4, there are two expressions there that are used in connection

with the compartment theory, and I'll just read them to you.

Ephesians chapter 4, verse 8 says, "...when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive and gave gifts unto men." That expression, led captivity captive, is used to explain Jesus going down into Sheol and taking home the redeemed with him to heaven. Verse 9, "...now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth?" That verse is also used to picture the Lord Jesus going down into that compartment in Sheol, and questions have been asked about those two expressions. He led captivity captive, and he descended into the lower parts of the earth.

With regard to the expression, he led captivity captive, turn back to Judges chapter 5 and verse 12. Judges chapter 5 and verse 12. This is the song of Deborah, one of the most majestic poems in the whole Old Testament.

It says in verse 12, "...awake, awake, Deborah, awake, awake, utter a song, arise, Barak, and lead thy captivity captive, thou son of Abinoam." Now, when it says, "...lead thy captivity captive," it's not talking about leading your friends captive, but leading your enemies captive. This is the other use of that expression in the Bible, "...lead thy captivity captive." And so, what I believe it's saying in Ephesians chapter 4 is that the Lord Jesus, in his glorious ascension, led captivity captive. It was a glorious triumph over his enemies, not in connection with his friends.

With regard to the expression, he descended into the lower parts of the earth, I'd also like you to turn back to Psalm 139. In Psalm 139, David is describing his birth, and actually he's describing his formation in his mother's womb. And, beginning in verse 13 of Psalm 139, it says, "...for thou hast possessed my reins," and that possessed means formed, it speaks of God putting together the various parts of the body in the womb, "...thou hast covered me in my mother's womb," and the word covered there really means knit, and it's a very picturesque word describing how the muscles and nerves and ligaments and veins and arteries are all knit together in the human body.

Beautiful. "...I will praise thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made, marvelous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well. Now, my frame, my substance," the word substance there really means frame, it means the skeletal structure, the skeleton, "...my skeleton, my frame was not hidden from thee when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth." Now, that's a strange expression, isn't it? He's describing the formation of the fetus in the mother's womb, and he says, "...curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth." Was David formed under the ground? Not at all.

The lowest parts of the earth there is a figurative, poetic expression, strange as it may seem. It's a poetic expression for the mother's womb. You say, I don't understand, neither do I, but you have to get used to figurative speech when you study the Bible.

It says, verse 69, "...I did see my substance," and there it's really my imperfect substance. It's just another expression for the fetus, "...and in thy book were all my members written, which day by day were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them." His whole diary was written ahead of time, before he ever came to the birth. Well, I mentioned that the lowest parts of the earth.

In this verse of Scripture, if you study the passage carefully, the lowest parts of the earth can only mean the mother's womb, and I believe that's what it means in Ephesians chapter 4. It's referring to the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's referring to Mary's womb. Now that he ascended, what is it but that he first descended into the lower parts of the earth? The argument there is that in the psalm you read

about the Messiah ascending back to heaven.

How could he ascend back to heaven? He always lived in heaven. It assumes that he first came down to the earth in incarnation, was born of the virgin Mary. Now, if any of you have any further question or would like to talk about it further, I'd be delighted to talk to you about it, but I just wanted to add that postscript.

Leaving captivity captive in the Bible has nothing to do with emancipating friends and taking them to a brighter sphere. It has to do with triumph over one's enemies. The lower parts of the earth could mean the surface of the earth.

I believe here it means the womb of the virgin Mary. And the Lord Jesus came down in incarnation, suffered blood and died, and then ascended back to heaven. Now, the passage I had particularly in mind for this morning was Hebrews chapter 6, and a lot of people have asked if we were going to speak about that, and so let's read the first part of Hebrews chapter 6. We'll begin with verse 1. Hebrews chapter 6, verse 1. I might just say I've been very gratified by the interest that's been shown in Bible study this week.

It did my heart good to look out this morning and see a couple of fellows just standing there with their Bibles open and discussing the Word of God. That makes me rejoice, it really does. Hebrews 6, verse 1. Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, and the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.

And this will we do, if God permits. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance, seeing they crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them, by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God.

But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned. But beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have shewed toward His name, and that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.

And we desire that every one of you do show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope, even to the end, that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises." The book was written to the Hebrews. It was written to the Jewish people in the early days of the Christian faith. The nation had been sleeping for centuries, in a sense, but all of a sudden the announcement comes of the Lord Jesus Christ, and some people think, is this indeed the Messiah? There was a movement toward Christ in those days.

Some people, some Jewish people, came and genuinely received Him as Lord and Savior. They were truly born again. Others wanted to get on the bandwagon.

Others professed to be followers of the Lord Jesus. They were never really born again, but they professed to become His followers. They were baptized and perhaps received into fellowship in local congregations.

Of course, when Jews then, as now, professed faith in the Lord Jesus, a terrible storm of opposition arose. They were traitors. They were considered renegades.

They were thrown out of their homes. They lost their employment. They were subjected to all kinds of harassment.

They were persecuted, and in some cases, they were put to death. The pressure on a professed believer in Jesus was enormous then, as it is now. Some years ago, I was in Israel.

I was introduced to a young fellow who had recently confessed his faith in Christ. We tried to carry on a conversation with him. I think we were with him about a half an hour, and during that half hour, he did nothing but weep, sob convulsively because of the pressures he was being subjected to.

It's important to see that in connection with this epistle. Under such pressure, there was a temptation to turn back. You can hear the rabbis presenting all the strong reasons why they should turn back to Judaism.

The beauty of the Judaistic system, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the elaborate garments, the furniture of the temple, and so forth. Some Jews who had professed faith in Christ turned back to Judaism. They abandoned Christ.

They turned their backs on Him. They utterly repudiated Him. They were never truly born again.

They were what we call apostates. An apostate is a person who professes faith in Christ. He may be baptized, he may have been in fellowship, it doesn't make any difference, but he subsequently repudiates Christ and maliciously turns his back on Christ.

He renounces the Christian faith. He's an apostate. And throughout the book of Hebrews, you have these very solemn warnings against apostasy.

That's what it's all about. I don't think you can understand the book of Hebrews unless you see this very clearly. I have read, I can't document it today, but I have read that when a Jew wanted to go back into Judaism, when he could no longer take the pressure and decided to abandon his profession of faith in Christ, that they had a little ceremony that he went through where they put the blood of an animal down on the floor and they said, okay, you want to come back to Judaism? That represents the blood of Christ.

Walk over it. And in many cases, they did it. They walked over it.

That's the background of what we're going to be reading this morning. I'd like to go back to the previous chapter, chapter 5, and in the latter part of that chapter, the writer says, verse 11, "...of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing that ye are dull of hearing, for when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you which be the first principles of the oracles of God, and are become such as of need of milk, and not of strong meat. For everyone that uses milk is unskillful in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe, but strong meat belongs to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of youth have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Now, I should just explain that the Jewish people living under the law were being taught by God the elementary principles of religion.

That's what the Old Testament was all about. We give children blocks. The blocks have A, B, C on one side, they have 1, 2, 3 on the other.

The children are learning the elementary principles of the alphabet, of words, and also of numerals as well. They're playing with blocks. That's what Israel was doing in the Old Testament.

It was playing with the elementary principles of religion. God was teaching Israel basic principles in those days. Now the full revelation of the Lord Jesus had come, and there was a necessity of leaving those things and going on to maturity, and that's exactly what the writer is saying here in verse 1 of chapter 6, therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ.

Now, Christ, the word Christ there, of course, has the idea of the Messiah. We're not to leave the Messiah, but we're to leave those elementary principles that led up to him. Elementary principles connected with the Messiah, and go on unto perfection, and of course perfection doesn't mean sinless perfection, it does not mean absolute holiness, but it means maturity, and here it means the maturity of the Christian faith.

They were to stop playing with blocks, as it were, and become enamored with the Lord Jesus himself. They were to lay aside the types and the shadows, and become engrossed with the substance. Here's a businessman, he goes off on a trip, and his wife has a picture of him up on the piano, and every day she goes up to the picture and she says, Darling, I really love you.

I miss you. I wish you would come back home. And he does, after two weeks he comes back home, and the next morning she goes up to the picture and she says, Darling, I love you, I miss you, I wish you'd come home.

He's already home. She shouldn't be occupied with the picture, should she, when he's already there. Well, that's what they were doing.

They were still occupied with the types and the shadows that the Savior had come. And so the writer says we want to leave these ABCs of religion and go on to maturity in the Christian life, not laying again the foundation up. Now, in the next words, he's going to describe some Old Testament doctrines.

Very important to see this. The list of things that we have now have nothing to do with the New Testament. He's describing things that Israel learned in the Old Testament.

Repentance from dead works. What does that mean, repentance from dead works? Well, it means from the works of the law. The works of the law never could produce life.

They were given by God, but they could never produce life. Of faith toward God. The people in the Old Testament were taught faith toward God.

You read all about it in Hebrews chapter 11, the great patriarchs of the Old Testament and how they put their faith in God. But notice it doesn't say faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, invariably, Christ is said to be the object of faith.

Of the doctrine of baptisms. When you come to baptisms here, we naturally think of Christian baptism. We think of baptism by immersion.

We think of baptism of the Spirit. That's not what's referred to here. The baptisms here are the ceremonial washings of the Old Testament.

How the parts of the sacrifices had to be washed. How the priests had to wash themselves. How the people had to go through these cumbersome ceremonial washings.

I think if you put the word washings there instead of baptisms, it'll be clearer for you. Because whenever we think baptism, we see it through New Testament eyes. But you mustn't see this list through New Testament eyes.

You must realize that it's Old Testament teaching. The teaching of baptism. And of laying on of hands.

Once again, we see it through New Testament eyes. And we see the laying on of hands ordaining or appointing to office. But that doesn't mean this.

This is the laying on of hands where the offerer came and laid his hands on the head of the sacrificial victim, identifying himself with the sacrifice. Don't think of it as the laying on of hands that you find in the book of Acts. Think of it as the laying on of hands that you find in Exodus and Leviticus.

And of resurrection of the dead. Was that taught in the Old Testament? Yes, that was one of the Old Testament doctrines. Mind you, it wasn't that clear in the Old Testament.

But a man like Abraham looked for a city which had foundation, whose builder and maker is God. Job said that in his flesh he would see God. So, you did have these gleams of light as far as the resurrection of the dead in the Old Testament.

And eternal judgment. Yes, that too was an Old Testament doctrine. So, in verses one and two, the writer to the Hebrews is saying, look, we've got to leave the basic elementary doctrines that you were taught in the Old Testament, and we've got to go on to maturity, that is, the maturity of the New Testament revelation.

Then he says, and this is what we do with God's permit. And in verse four, he begins to describe a people who are known as apostates. We call them apostates.

Once again, I'll define the apostate. He's a man who has professed faith in Christ. He may have been baptized, he may have taken his place in a local fellowship, but he subsequently repudiates Christ, maliciously repudiates him.

He abandons the Christian faith and, in this case, goes back to a system of ceremonial religion. A good illustration of an apostate in the New Testament is Judas. Judas was never born again.

He was never truly saved. He accompanied with the 11th and with the Lord Jesus. He held the bag, made a good show for a while, but he subsequently proved that he did not have divine life.

There's a difference between an apostate and a backslider. Peter was a backslider. Judas was an apostate.

Keep those two names in mind, and I think you'll have the difference. Peter got away from the Lord, but he was restored to the Lord. Judas sold the Lord for 30 pieces of silver and went to his own place.

Okay, now it's going to describe apostates. It says it is impossible for those who were once enlightened. It's possible to be enlightened with the gospel, to grow up in a Christian family, to know the gospel from beginning to end, and yet never truly be born again.

Judas was enlightened. He saw the marvelous miracles that the Lord Jesus performed. He heard those gracious words that proceeded from the mouth of the Savior of the world, but he never appropriated Christ

for himself.

He was enlightened and tasted of the heavenly gift. I believe the heavenly gift here is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the gift of God sent down from heaven. Now, I know that the conflict rages about this word taste, and actually you can't prove anything from the word taste, because sometimes taste means to take completely, and other times it means just to taste but to refuse.

Let me give you an illustration. It says in this very book, in Hebrews chapter 2, verse 9, that Christ tasted death for every man, and I tell you, when he tasted it, he tasted it to the full. He endured death completely.

But, also in Matthew 27, 34, when they gave him the vinegar mingled with gall, he tasted it, but he would not drink it. So, the word taste is inconclusive in the argument. You can't prove anything from it.

I believe it's possible to taste the heavenly gift. I think back to my own unsaved days. But, I certainly knew about the Lord Jesus without accepting him.

We're made partakers of the Holy Spirit. Well, that sounds strong, doesn't it? You'd almost think these people were saved. But, I want to tell you this.

I was a partaker of the Holy Spirit before I was ever saved. I was a partaker of his convicting ministry. I knew what the deep convicting work of the Holy Spirit of God was, and how he came into my life and showed me that what I was inside was a lot worse than anything I had ever done.

That was true. What a glorious revelation that was to me. I mean, it wasn't comfortable, but it was wonderful, because I had lived a very protected life brought up in a strict Presbyterian home where we weren't allowed to do very much and less on Sunday.

And, that's what they say. They say the Scotch people keep the Sabbath and everything else they can get their hands on. Well, that's the kind of a home I was brought up in, and I knew, I knew the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

I was a partaker of the Holy Ghost in that sense, but I wasn't saved. I claim to you this morning that you can be a partaker of the Holy Spirit and not be genuinely born again. It says, "...have tasted the good word of God." Well, I certainly had tasted the good word of God.

I used to witness the kids in the neighborhood, and I wasn't even saved myself. I could quote scriptures to them, but I had never come to Christ for salvation. And then, it says, "...the powers of the world come, the powers of the age to come." During the early days of the church, of course, the Lord Jesus, the apostles performed miracles.

Miracles. That's what the word powers means here. It means miracles.

The age to come is the millennium. The miracles that were performed when the Lord Jesus came the first time will be performed again when he comes the second time. The miracles of the age to come.

The miracles of the millennium. Are you with me? I claim this morning that all of those things can be true of an unsaved person. I'm sorry to say that there was a young man came to Emmaus years ago.

Straight-A student. He used to go out with us on the street corner, 64th and Halsted. He used to give his testimony and play the trumpet.

Went off to college, went into the service, and completely and utterly repudiated the Christian faith. I wrote letters to him, punctuated with tears. I sent him a copy of a book, Why I Believe the Bible is the Word of God by Algernon J. Pollock.

The book came back to me with the most snide remarks written in the margin. Complete denial, a ridiculing of the Christian faith. Two years ago, he died a horrible death with a brain tumor.

He never stepped back to God. It's hard to believe he was never born again, but I do believe it. I believe he was a Judas, not a Peter.

It says here, if they shall fall away, and fall away there is apostatized. If they shall fall away, it is impossible to renew them again unto repentance. Dear friends, I'm sorry to say that I've known quite a few people who have committed this sin, and I've never known one who's ever been restored.

It's sad. The last conference I was at, somebody asked the question, what reference does Hebrews 6 have to Gentiles today? I say it applies just as much to Gentiles today as it did to Jews in that day. You say, ah, but where there's life, there's hope.

Well, that's a nice saying, but I don't believe it's true. I believe there are three unpardonable sins mentioned in the scriptures. Three unpardonable sins.

It's an unpardonable sin to die without trusting Christ. There's no hope for a person like that. There's no second chance.

That's one. Matthew chapter 12 speaks about the unpardonable sin where the Lord Jesus was here on earth, and he was performing miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Pharisees said he was performing those miracles by the power of the Elzebug, the God of filth. They were calling the Holy Spirit the God of filth, the prince of the demons.

And Jesus said there's forgiveness for any sin in this age or in the millennial age, but for this particular sin, there's no forgiveness. Calling the Holy Spirit Satan, and attributing the miracles of Jesus on earth to the devil. It's the second unpardonable sin.

And here you have the third unpardonable sin. Professing faith in Christ, going on brightly for a while, and then turning your back on Christ, renouncing the Christian faith, going back to a religion of ceremony and ritual, and maliciously denying Jesus. No forgiveness for that.

No restoration to this life. You say, what should I do with a person like that? All you can do is commit him to God. I believe this is a sin that's spoken of in 1 John chapter 5. There is sin unto death.

I do not say that you should pray for it. It doesn't say that a believer commits this sin. It says there's sin.

Well, let's turn to the passage, because it speaks about a brother in the first part of that, but then it does not speak about a brother in the second part. First John 5, 16. It says, if any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death.

In other words, a brother can sin and be graciously restored. You can pray for him. It says there is a sin unto death.

It doesn't say a brother commits it. It says there is a sin unto death. I do not say that he shall pray for it.

I think in a case like this, all we can do is commit the person to God. Verse 6 again. If they shall fall away, it's impossible to renew them again unto repentance.

Why? Seeing they crucified in themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. And then it goes on to describe vegetation and how it reacts to rain, for it says, For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh aft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs neat for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God. The good response of that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing, whose end is to be burned.

Now, I'd like you to pay particular attention to verse 9. It says, But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation. To me, that implies that the things that were listed back there in verse 4 and 5 are not things that accompany salvation. He says, Beloved, we are persuaded of better things of you, and things that accompany salvation.

Now, just in closing, I'd like you to turn over to the tenth chapter, because this is a refrain that goes through all the book. The tenth chapter. In verse 25, it has an expression there that we often use to encourage faithful attendance at the meetings of the assembly.

It says, Not forsaking the assembly of ourselves together as a matter of some is, but exhorting one another in so much more as ye see the day approacheth. Actually, in its primary interpretation, the assembling of ourselves together in that verse means not forsaking the assembly of ourselves together. It means not forsaking the Christian faith.

It's speaking about, it's warning against the sin of apostasy. Now, I think it's valid to apply it to faithful attendance at the assembly, but in the context, the forsaking the assembling of ourselves together refers to the sin of apostasy. It goes on to describe it in verse 26, For if we sin willfully.

A lot of people are shaken by this verse, because they say, Well, look, I know I was wrong, and I did it. Well, that's true. We do sin willfully, but the willful sin in this verse is the sin of apostasy, and a true believer cannot commit it.

I should pause here to say that the devil often uses these passages to unsettle Christians. I've had Christians on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The devil takes these passages of Scripture and just sifts God's people with them.

Listen, if you committed this sin, you'd never worry about it. The very fact that people are concerned about it is proof they have not committed it. People who've committed the sin of apostasy never are concerned about it at all.

They do not fear. Their hand never sweats. If we sin willfully, the sin of apostasy, after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifices, and God has nothing else.

If you maliciously repudiate Christ and abandon him, there's nothing more. He is God's final word. But a certain looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversary.

Believers? No, not true believers. This would never come to true believers. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses.

That is, one who broke the Ten Commandments, one who broke the law of Israel, was subject to that penalty. Died without mercy under two or three witnesses. Notice.

Of how much sorer punishment, suppose he, shall he be thought worthy who has trodden underfoot the Son of God? That blood, that animal blood, represents the blood of Christ. You want to return to Judaism? Walk over it. Who has trodden underfoot the Son of God, hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace.

For we know him that said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, the Lord shall judge his people. It's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It's an ominous scene of judgment for one who repudiates the Lord Jesus Christ. It has nothing to do with a backslider. I emphasize that again.

It has to do with one who is a professor, never born again, and who subsequently turns away from Christ in a bitter, hateful way, and will have nothing more to do with Christianity. Are there people like that around us today? Yes, I could mention them without mentioning their names. A man who was the head of Youth for Christ in a great city in the North American continent, and seemingly had a great ministry.

And people said to him, You're a good brother, but what you really need is to go to seminary. And he did. He went back to Princeton Seminary, and when he got out, he had no faith.

Turned his back on Christ, lost at the resurrection today, at all the great fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. That's the kind of a person that is spoken of in Hebrews chapter 6. Shall we pray? Father, we pray for the gospel as it goes out today. We pray that you will deliver men from mere profession.

We think of the great wave of profession that goes over the United States. We think of how glibly the words born again are used. And we think of the carnal means that are used to extract professions from people.

Oh God, we pray that you will deliver us from bringing Ishmaels to the birth. May we only see heavenly Isaacs brought to the birth. May we depend on the work of the Holy Spirit of God, convicting and converting.

May we not be contributing to the terrible sin of apostasy in the lives of men and women. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

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