

Are There Paradoxes in the Bible?

by Clark Blanchard

- *What is a paradox?*
- *How should we deal with paradoxes?*

There is an old fascinating story about a missionary serving a remote primitive tribe, halfway around the world. When it came time for his furlough, the missionary thought it would be beneficial to take one of the tribesmen back home with him. When he proposed it to the tribal leaders, they asked in which direction the missionary would go to get home. He said that he could go either east or west, it didn't greatly matter. Having no concept of a spherical earth, the tribesmen quickly decided to stay put.

To the tribesmen, they were dealing with an unbelievable **paradox**. Their solution was to simply disbelieve the missionary and stay home. Of course, what they needed was a lot more knowledge about the world in which they lived. This would have dispelled their paradox and restored their trust in the missionary.

“Webster’s College Dictionary” defines *paradox* as “a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth.” The word *paradox* comes from the Greek *paradoxos* and is composed of *para* = *beside* and *doxa* = *opinion* [“Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words,” page 1102].

In Luke 5, we have the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. He did it as proof of His authority, as God, to forgive sins. The crowd’s reaction is given in verse 26. And they were all seized with astonishment and began glorifying God; *and they were filled with fear, saying, “We have seen remarkable things today”* [emphasis mine]. They had witnessed a man convincingly demonstrate the role of God—a **paradox**. Interestingly, the word in the Greek translated *remarkable things* is *paradoxa*.

In this life, we are like the primitive tribesmen and at times are confronted with irreconcilable paradoxes. For example, in science, light exhibits characteristics of pure energy. However, it also exhibits characteristics of matter, being attracted by gravity. Both conflicting facts seem to be true. Science has numerous similar apparent paradoxes.

The ultimate reason for these apparent conflicts in science is that we are dealing with the handiwork of God, Who is omnipotent and omniscient. Therefore, they appear to us as paradoxes because we, like the tribesmen, lack sufficient knowledge to sort it out. So mature scientists learn to live with the paradoxes in hopes of more thorough knowledge on the subjects some-time later, though possibly never.

Biblical Paradoxes

In the very same way, as we study our Bibles, we become exposed to some paradoxes—seemingly contradictory teachings. Here are three examples:

Salvation—The Bible teaches the free will of man to choose or reject salvation.

- *... if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9).

- *Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved* (Romans 10:13).
- *So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God* (Romans 14:12).

Yet, there are numerous other passages that teach predestination.

- *... God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth* (2 Thessalonians 2:13b).
- *...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will* (Ephesians 1:11).
- *...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world,... In love He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will* (Ephesians 1:4-5).

The Trinity—Another biblical paradox relates to the Trinity. On one hand, the Bible clearly teaches monotheism, that there is one and only one God and He is one.

- *“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one”* (Deuteronomy 6:4).
- *Jesus answered, “The foremost is, Hear O Israel! the Lord our God is one Lord”* (Mark 12:29).
- *“To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him”* (Deuteronomy 4:35).

Yet, the Bible also teaches that the one God actually consists of three persons, the Trinity.

- *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”* (Matthew 28:19).
- *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all* (2 Corinthians 13:14).
- *“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also, because you have been with Me from the beginning”* (John 15:26-27).

The Nature of Christ —Another somewhat related paradox is the nature of Jesus Christ. Many passages clearly teach that He is a 100% human being.

- *And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone”* (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19).
- *But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law ...* (Galatians 4:4).
- *And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men* (Luke 2:52).
- *... which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh* (Romans 1:2-3).

Yet many other passages teach that Jesus is 100% Deity. He is God in the flesh. (Note it doesn't teach that He is 50% man and 50% God. He's 100% man and 100% God.)

- *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (John 1:1).
- *“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son and they shall call His name, Immanuel,” which translated means, “God with us”* (Matthew 1:23).
- *For in Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form* (Colossians 2:9).

Dealing with Paradoxes

In each of these three samples from the Bible, we see that a true paradox exists. They are seemingly contradictory teachings. But apparent contradictions are not actual contradictions. For example, the Bible never says that God is three Persons and that He is one Person. That would be an actual contradiction. One reaction to biblical paradoxes is simply to claim that the Bible is self-contradictory, therefore untrue, and dismiss any serious consideration of Scripture. Unfortunately, many have taken this dead end.

Another reaction is to dogmatically accept only one side of the paradox and dismiss the other side. For example, many Christians, including whole denominations, have rigidly taken either the view of predestination or the view of free will.

Many others try to find some middle ground. For example, they may say that man has 50% free will and God has 50% sovereignty. Of course, this is absurd because 50% of either free will or sovereignty is, in fact, neither. This, the Bible does not teach. It teaches 100% of each.

Therefore, the mature view of paradoxes is first to be sure that you are dealing with a true paradox, not just a difficult passage. Don't be too quick to "punt" to a paradox.

Then, if you're convinced you have a true paradox such as predestination and free will, accept **both** extremes. Why? Because the Bible teaches both extremes. Dealing with paradoxes in this manner is a recognition of (1) our limited knowledge, (2) the authority of Scripture, and (3) the sovereignty of God (Psalm 139).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is a paradox?*

A: A paradox is "a seemingly contradictory or absurd statement that expresses a possible truth."

Q: *Are there paradoxes in the Bible?*

A: Yes, there are some paradoxes, such as predestination and free will. They teach as true two seemingly opposite sides of an issue.

Q: *How should we deal with paradoxes?*

A: First, make certain that we are dealing with a true paradox, not just a difficult passage. Then accept, as true, both extremes of the paradox. We should accept both extremes, recognizing our limited knowledge, because the Bible teaches both sides as true.