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BIBLE BASEBALL

Some people may disagree, but the best final score in baseball is 1-0, and the best possible score is if your team is the one having scored the one run. We are now in a time, and maybe always have been, when people want to see home runs. Some baseball purists, however, would rather see runs manufactured a base or two at a time, and still others think the best thing in baseball is a pitcher's duel. A double no-hitter going into the last inning would be the closest thing to heaven on earth. Some other people of questionable intelligence do not even like baseball. But baseball is biblical.

Of course, there is the old idea that God created the world "in the big inning." (Genesis 1:1) It must not have been much of a pitcher's duel because he hit a home run almost every day that week. "And it was good." (Except on day two.) Then on the sixth day he must have hit a grand slam, because he saw that "it was very good."

The Bible makes reference to several baseball teams. David slew a bear and a lion (1 Sam 17:36), and although those are football teams, he might also have dealt with their baseball equivalents, the Cubs and the Tigers. We know for sure that he faced that bicoastal team, the Giants, and won. Although some of his teammates also faced the Giants, David won with only one pitch, a fastball. (One might even speculate that David was playing for the Rockies that day.) Noah played for the Brewers. (Gen 9:20-21) Thomas was one of the Twins. (Jn 11:16) Saul and David headlined a whole team of Royals. Perhaps the biggest team was the Angels. God even wrote a letter to a baseball team; but he addressed it to their city—Philadelphia—rather than to the Phillies. (Rev 3:7ff)

In baseball there is offense and defense. Everybody plays both, but some are better known in one or the other category.

Several people are more notable because they were in the field rather than on offense. Cain took his brother in the field, and it was a slaughter. (Gen 4:8) Isaac must have been a right fielder, because he had time to meditate there. (Gen 24:63) Gideon's mother played in the field, but may not have been too good because she just sat there. (Judg 13:9) Shepherds apparently make good fielders. (Lk 2:8) The brother of the prodigal must have

made some errors, because he was angry when he came in from the field. (Lk 15)

On the other hand, some people were more noted for their batting skills, although they didn't always use a conventional bat. Moses smote a rock with his rod (the origin of stickball). (Num 20:11) Some used the edge of the sword (Num 21:24, Josh 8:24, *et al*), although that probably meant they needed a new ball after every foul or hit. Perhaps the strangest substitute for a bat was used when Samson was called on to pinch hit; he grabbed the jawbone of an ass. (Jud 15:15-17)

There are even some baseball stadiums mentioned. In recent years games have been played at Wrigley Field and (before a name change) Jacobs Field. In olden times there were fields where games were played. A team under a guy named Hadad played to such a victory over the team from Midian in Moab Field that it was still famous after several years. (Gen 36:35; 1 Chron 1:46) David sang the praises of wonderful games in Zoan Field. (Ps 78:12, 43) Perhaps more famous in its day than Wrigley Field or Ebbets Field was a stadium purchased by Abraham, Machpelah Field. It was such a famous place that you might even say people were dying to get in there. (Gen 23:19; 25:9; 49:30) They don't let people sprinkle cremains over Wrigley Field, but they let a number of people be buried at Machpelah.

There is a saying that "baseball isn't *like* life; baseball *is* life." When your team is perpetually losing, you might even add that "baseball is death." More people have claimed to have seen Babe Ruth's "called home run" than the stadium would hold. In like manner, maybe you can brag that you saw Goliath get hit by the pitch that put him out of the game for good.

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CREDO: I BELIEVE

Members of the Churches of Christ may be quite familiar with some of the slogans coming out of the Restoration Movement in America (early to middle 1800s). Perhaps the favorite is that “where the scriptures speak we speak; where the Bible is silent we are silent.” Because of various groups adopting practices or words that were not biblical, we “Do Bible things in Bible ways; call Bible things by Bible names.” Another was, “No headquarters but heaven, no creed but Christ, no book but the Bible.” This emphasized the autonomy of individual congregations and the authority for doctrine. Some have, perhaps unfortunately, shortened that to “no creed but the Bible.” Unfortunate, because by definition each of those slogans is, in itself, a creed.

A creed is a brief statement of belief. The word comes from the Latin *credo*, I believe. Most creeds—such as the Apostles Creed, the Nicene Creed, or those above—were written primarily to distinguish one group from another. When the Gnostics were teaching that Jesus could never have been fully human and others were teaching that Jesus was not coeternal with God, the Nicene Creed defined the eternal divinity of Jesus. The Apostles Creed

What were these weightier matters? Exactly what Micah had said.”

was apparently written, in part, to counter the doctrine that Jesus’ body (flesh) was not resurrected, and perhaps a doctrine denying the virgin birth. The triune creed mentioned above was a response to: 1) Roman Catholic hierarchy; 2) man-written creeds that did not always conform strictly to the Bible; and 3) the proliferation of books defining what faith should be. (It later applied also to the Book of Mormon and the writings of Mary Baker Eddy.) Any creed will naturally distinguish its followers from others, but that is not necessarily wrong. After all, the Bible itself contains several creeds. Some are more complex than others, having anywhere from ten to only two statements.

The Ten Commandments

Although not the earliest creed in the Bible, the Ten Commandments are the most familiar and the most complex. While some of its tenets have universal application (do not steal, do not commit murder), this creed was given specifically to the Israelites (later

designated the Jewish people). They had just come out of bondage in Egypt. They had been exposed for years to Egyptian thought and religion. God needed to put in simple terms what he expected of them that was different from what they were familiar with. That may be why the first commandment is that they were to put no other gods in priority to Him.

The Apostles Creed originally consisted of twelve statements, each according to tradition having been contributed by one of the apostles. The Ten Commandments are, obviously, ten statements. They can be divided into two or three groupings, depending on how you consider the fourth commandment. The first group deals with man’s relationship with God. The fifth through tenth commands define man’s relationship with man. The fourth (the Sabbath) is often grouped with the first three, but is actually transitional, defining one’s relationship within oneself as well as with God and man.

While this creed was defined to distinguish the Jewish people from others, many non-Jews still consider it as the foundational creed of all life. Thus we have arguments, even by non-Jews, over whether or not the Ten Commandments should be displayed on U.S. government property.

Simpler Creeds

Rabbi Simlai said, “Six hundred thirteen commandments were given to Moses—365 negative, equaling the number of days in the year, and 248 positive, equaling the number of a man’s members. David came and reduced them to eleven. Then Isaiah reduced them to six, Micah to three, and Isaiah again to two, as it is said, “Keep judgment and do righteousness.” Then Amos reduced them to one, “Seek me and live.” Or one could say Habakkuk: “The righteous shall live by his faith.” (Talmud, Makkot 23b-24a, abridged)

This rabbinic statement covers several statements of creeds, simplifications of what God expects of us. The reference to David’s reducing them to eleven is to Psalm 15. These all put limits on how we deal with other people, and do not include the God-related commands of the Ten.

Isaiah reduced the commands to six. (Isa 33:15) These are similar to the creed of Psalm 15, including such generalities as walking righteously and speaking uprightly. It also contains more specifics, such as eschewing bribes and not looking upon evil.

The triune creed of Micah bears looking into. “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Micah 6:8) When

2 Jesus pronounced woes on the scribes and Pharisees, one

condemnation was that they tithed precisely while omitting “the weightier matters of the law.” What were these weightier matters? Exactly what Micah had said, “judgment, mercy, and faith.” (Matt 23:23) Justice requires adherence to the commands of God. More specifically, justice demands that one does not enforce one command while ignoring others. It also means treating all men equally before the law, not excusing one for gain or favor over another. Both David and Isaiah, in their summaries referred to earlier, specifically condemned taking bribes to pervert justice. Mercy, on the other hand, tempers justice. One can be strict and unforgiving in respect to God’s laws, or one can show mercy. This should not be based on gain, but each instance based on its own merits. Christians particularly should show mercy to those who have erred, because God has been merciful to each of us who have become part of the body of Christ. Jesus equates faith with “walking humbly with thy God.” If one believes in the supreme creator God, how can one walk in his presence other than humbly? When we believe that “God exists, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him” (Heb 11:6), the only possible response is humility. This is not abasement, belittling oneself. After all, the writer of Hebrews said we could “come boldly unto the throne of grace.” (Heb 4:16) We don’t come crawling to God, but we do come in humility, acknowledging Him as our superior.

The other three mentioned in the passage from the Talmud are Isaiah 66:1, Amos 5:4, and Habakkuk 2:4. They are even further simplifications, perhaps oversimplifications if looked upon as creeds, of the passages already addressed.

The Jesus Creed

Some of the creeds written by men have value in defining belief or action. Even the “five steps” to salvation (“hear, believe, repent, confess, and be immersed” or “faith, repentance, confession, immersion, and the gift of the Holy Spirit”) help to teach others what the Bible says concerning salvation. The danger is that one may become legalistic with any manmade creed.

Jesus was asked what his creed was. His response may have surprised some, although it was earlier stated by some prominent Pharisees.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt 22:37-40)

It is probable that the questioner, who was a specialist in the Law, was asking which of the Ten was the greatest. After all, we generally consider murder to be more serious than petty theft, and both of them more serious than envying your neighbor. We tend to rank laws, especially the Ten Commandments. If truth be told, most

people would probably rank “do not murder” above “don’t make any engraved images.” One reason we tend to do that is that we have our “pet” sins that we want to be less important than any others; or we have our serious sins that we consider unforgivable in others.

The Ten Commandments, as noted earlier can be divided into laws about how we deal with God and with each other. Jesus answered that these two areas sum up the whole of God’s laws for us. Instead of quoting from the Ten Commandments, though, he went to different sources. When discussing creeds, the Jewish people have always considered one to be above all others. That is the *Sh’ma* contained in Exodus 6:4-5.

Sh’ma Yisra’eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. V’hav’ta eit Adonai Elohekha b’khol l’vav’kha uv’khol naf’sh’kha uv’khol m’odekha. (Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.)

This is such a foundational statement that the

Christians particularly should show mercy to those who have erred, because God has been merciful to each of us.

questioner probably nodded his head in agreement. Yes, this was the greatest command. He may have been surprised, though, when Jesus continued by quoting from Leviticus 19:18. (Of course, at the time the passages were not divided into chapters and verses, but it is convenient for us to think in those terms.) One of the surprising things is the context of the passage. It immediately follows as a result of choosing not to take revenge. “Do not bear a grudge, but love your neighbor as yourself.” The second most important command is not to take revenge? No, Jesus takes the passage out of that context and makes it much broader. Under all circumstances, love your neighbor.

In the account in Luke 10, the lawyer, “wishing to justify himself,” asks who his neighbor is. Jesus tells the parable we know as The Good Samaritan. His point is that if you love God fully, you will seek the best for all people. It may be a man lying beaten beside the road. It may be the homeless man on the street corner, or the refugee seeking asylum. It may be the person down the street or at the check-out line at the store who has never heard about Jesus. It may be an abusive spouse, or a loving one. It may even be a rebellious child. It could be yourself. The Jesus Creed says love; God first and others second. If you love God first, then the second part comes naturally.

THE REST OF THE STORY

Most people are familiar with the story of Balaam and his donkey. (Num 22-24) (Technically it was a donkey because it was domesticated and an ass is not.) This story puts Balaam in a good light, but all the passages in the New Testament that refer to the man consider him evil. Why is this?

Perhaps a brief summary of the story is in order. The Israelites were camped near the Jordan River, in the territory of Moab. Balak, the king of Moab, sent to Balaam to hire him to curse Israel so he could defeat them. Balaam at first refused, but on being offered more money decided, with God's blessing, to do what Balak wanted, under the condition that he would only speak what God told him. On the way to Moab, the angel of God stood in the way three times, threatening to kill Balaam. When Balaam struck his donkey the third time, the donkey spoke in complaint. The angel told him that his donkey saved his life, and let him go onward. When he arrived in Moab, Balaam met with Balak, who took him three times to look at the Israelite camp and curse them. Each time, Balaam reiterated that he could only say what God told him to say. All three times he blessed Israel rather than cursing them. Balak then sent him home. The next chapter (Numbers 25) seems unrelated. It tells of Israel mingling with the Moabite women and worshiping their idols, which caused God to kill 24,000 Israelites. It would have been more except for the indignation of Aaron's son Pinchas. Then a few chapters later it is told that Israel slew the kings of Midian, and Balaam also. (Num 31:8; Josh 13:22)

Israel was doing well, and had just received God's blessing in triplicate. What happened between chapters 24 and 25? Apparently, Balaam happened. The rabbis say

that Balak complained that Balaam had taken his money, and Balaam greedily refused to give it back. Instead, he told Balak how to defeat the Israelites: let their women seduce the Israelite men and they would forsake God.

There is strong biblical evidence that this is exactly what happened between the chapters. Both in the Old and New Testaments, Balaam is subsequently vilified rather than praised.

In Deuteronomy 23, Moses implies that Balaam really wanted to curse Israel, but God changed his words. Joshua (24:9-10) and Nehemiah (13:2) seem to hold this same idea. Although he said he could only speak the words of God, he was hoping that those words would be a curse.

The second letter of Peter and the letter from Jude are very similar. In both, Balaam's motives are revealed. Peter says he "loved the wages of unrighteousness." (2 Pet 2:15) Jude (verse 11) calls him greedy. That greed apparently manifested itself. He had to earn his money.

John is a little more specific in his description of Balaam. It occurs in the Spirit's letter to the church at Pergamos.

But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balak to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. (Rev 2:14)

John agrees with the rabbinic description. Balaam is the one who came up with the idea to seduce Israel. When we tell the story of Balaam, perhaps we don't always tell the whole story.

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