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WHY DID THEY SURVIVE?

Recently I saw a post on Facebook where an individual was stating his reasons for not believing in God or the Bible. He said that after a disaster it is not uncommon for some Christians to say of the survivors that “God must have had a purpose for them to live.” He went on to say that if God had a purpose for them to live it must imply that God had a purpose for the others to die. He did not want to worship a god that arbitrarily caused disasters in order to kill some individuals and leave only those for whom he had some divine purpose.

This person’s logic appears to be sound except for one thing. It is based on a faulty premise.

That person was correct in saying that many Christians make the claim that surviving a disaster must mean that God has a reason why that person survived. Just because many Christians believe it, however, does not make it so. In fact, making that statement may lead many people to the same false conclusion this individual made.

The corollary to that statement is that if someone died in the disaster, God must have wished for them to die. This also leads to the faulty conclusion that God causes disasters in order to weed out the evil from the good.

The Jews that Jesus knew held this same belief. It can be traced back much farther in time. In the book of Job, the three friends argue that since Job has suffered the loss of family, wealth, and health, he must be an unrepentant sinner. While Job makes some really bad conclusions of his own, he is adamant that he did not sin in any way to deserve the punishment he (apparently) was being dealt.

Jesus chose to answer those who held these beliefs by saying that their beliefs were wrong. Sometimes a disaster is just a disaster. Sometimes good people die or suffer.

One time he and his disciples passed a blind man. Some of the disciples who held these beliefs asked, “Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn 9:2) Jesus replied that it was neither, but rather that “he works of God should be made manifest in him.” His blindness was not caused by sin. In this particular case, God may have caused his blindness, but it was so that

Jesus could give him sight. In that way, those who witnessed the miracle would praise God.

On another occasion, his disciples were discussing some people who had been executed by the Romans while offering their sacrifices. Apparently they were saying that these people must have been great sinners.

And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (Lk 13:2-5)

These things didn’t happen to them because they were sinners, or others didn’t survive because they were righteous. The Galilaeans died because Pilate made a bad choice. The eighteen died because an architect used faulty materials or cut corners in construction. If someone dies in a car crash, perhaps it is because someone chose to drink and drive. To say that God must have had a reason for that person to live or die implies that God controls every second of our lives; we don’t have free will.

It may be that someone survived the recent collapse of an apartment building in Florida because God still has a purpose for their life. It may also be that some of those survivors are sinners who will never repent. We should be careful about making pronouncements about God’s intentions when we don’t know his mind. And we should be careful that by making such pronouncements we don’t drive someone away from God.

CONTENTS

Why Did They Survive?	1
It’s a Parabola	2
Wipe Away Tears	4

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IT'S A PARABOLA

Literary interpretation is tricky. How many people have had the experience in an English literature class of having to interpret a poem? How many of those people have submitted what they thought was a perfectly valid interpretation for them, only to be told by the teacher that that was not what the poet meant at all. Many teachers approach literary interpretation with the attitude of “my way or the highway.” They can’t conceive of someone with a different emotional and experiential background getting something else out of the poem. There is a reason most literature teachers are not poets. Most poets would be happy to know that their work touched something in another person, even if that was not something they even thought of when writing the poem. Poetry touches the heart, not the mind.

Nevertheless, there are certain rules to literary interpretation. Some of them apply across the board. Others may be specific to the genre being interpreted. That

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is true of the various biblical genres, such as apocalyptic, historic, poetic, prophetic, and legal. There are even rules for the interpretation of parables, although some of the rules are frequently violated.

Context

As in any literary interpretation, context is king. Many a parable has been misinterpreted because people (preachers) ignored the context. It is important to understand that context may be either internal or external.

The internal context is what the surrounding text says. It tells why a parable was told, and maybe why a particular setting was used. Quite often it also tells the meaning of the parable.

The parables found in Luke 15 have been called “the Lost Sheep,” “the Lost Coin,” and “the Lost Son.” (Although this latter is more often called the Wasteful Son despite the context that makes his prodigality incidental to the meaning.) The immediate internal context of all three can be found early in the chapter.

Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes

murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. (Lk 15:1-2)

Many a sermon has been preached about the Prodigal Son that ignores this context. All three parables are a unity. They all have the same meaning: God rejoices over sinners who repent. Nevertheless, preachers will talk about the older brother representing the Jewish people and the wasteful brother representing the Gentiles, who would be accepted into the church to the chagrin of the Jewish people. That interpretation might sound good to non-Jewish Christians, but it is not borne up by the context. The lost son of the parable represents the “tax collectors and sinners” that came to hear Jesus. The elder brother represents the Pharisees and others who objected to those people eating with Jesus. The internal context demands this understanding.

External context is those factors outside of what is written to give context to the parable. In the previous example, external context may include time, politics, and even Jewish law. The timing of the story would preclude the Jew/Gentile interpretation. The church was months or years away from existence, and the incorporation of the Gentiles into the church was ten to twelve years away. The incorporation of elements of Jewish law precludes a gentile interpretation. These elements include the laws of inheritance, *kashrus* (kosher law, particularly as it relates to pigs), and an understanding why tax collectors were considered so vile. Some other parables may require an understanding of external factors such as the construction of Jewish houses, the care of sheep, or other agricultural or fishing practices.

Audience

One aspect of context that is often neglected is the audience. A parable is meant to teach a lesson to a specific, current audience. It should not be interpreted in terms of an audience even ten years separate from the time it was told.

Generally speaking, the parables of Jesus were told to a Jewish audience. They would be understood in Jewish terms. Any interpretation that includes the Gentiles as a specific, separate group is probably erroneous. Some parables apply generally to all people, including Jews and Gentiles, but few, if any, include the Gentiles as a separate entity.

The parables were also told to a primarily agricultural audience. Some were told in the cities, but even then the audience was quite familiar with any references to farming, plants, or fishing. This makes it harder for modern urban audiences, but only requires a little study to find the meaning.

Knowing the cultural background of the audience is important. It is also important to understand that First Century audiences were not 21st Century American audiences. Again, interpretations about Gentiles coming into the church probably wouldn't have sat well with the audiences to whom Jesus spoke, even if they could have understood that.

Likewise, it is fruitless to debate whether Jesus supported or defended slavery when he uses slaves in the parable. Sometimes we soften the parables by using the term servants in place of the proper term, slaves. Jesus was familiar with slavery, as were his audiences. None of the parables were taught about the institution of slavery, therefore it was a useful example of what Jesus was really teaching.

Symbols

Parables are, by nature, symbolic. The word parable comes from words meaning "to throw beside." It is a story that is thrown beside a principle. Sometimes it is defined as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. That is not quite accurate, because there are parables, even in the Bible, that don't have a spiritual meaning. For example, the parable found in 2 Kings 14:9 has a practical, but not spiritual meaning. It was told to remind the king of Judah not to get too cocky.

Because the parables use symbols, it can be easy to assign a meaning not originally intended. If Jesus had not explained the parable of the sower, people might have come up with all sorts of meanings for the seed, the various soils, and even the sower.

In that parable, Jesus explains that each of the elements had a symbolic meaning. Not all parables are like that. Sometimes it is easy to overanalyze the symbols of a parable. In the story of the ten virgins it is not necessary to give symbolic meaning to the oil, or even the virgins. The oil is simply oil and the virgins are simply attendants to the bride. They don't have to be anything else. A parable is not an allegory.

Get the point

The real danger of overanalyzing the symbols in a parable is that by doing so we break the final, most important rule of interpretation. A parable is told to make a point. When we violate some of the other rules of interpretation we may miss the point of the story entirely.

If the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31) is a parable, which some debate, it is a fine example of forgetting this rule. The context is covetousness. The point is found in verse 25.

Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

A secondary point is found in the last verse. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Instead of accepting these points of the story, some have gone off on a tangent to create an elaborate depiction of the afterlife. "Abraham's bosom" and "torment" are incidental to the story. They may or may not reflect current beliefs. They may merely be memes, like Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates. It is significant that this is the only passage in all of scripture that even hints of some sort of consciousness between death and the resurrection. Paul apparently believed that the dead know nothing until the coming resurrection. (1 Thes 4:13-18) Instead some have used this story to create an "intermediate" world. In their view the order is death, paradise or torment, resurrection, judgement, and heaven or hell. Never mind that this intermediate existence implies some sort of judgement before the final judgement. More importantly,

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never mind that such speculations miss the point of the story entirely.

It's like the law teacher who told a story of a man hunting a rabbit. As he was tracking it he got hungry, so he stopped to eat some berries. While he was eating, a bear showed up and he had to run away from it. While doing so, he twisted his ankle, and limped back to his car to go to the hospital. At this point, one of his law students raised his hand. "Professor," he asked. "What happened to the rabbit?" The professor replied, "Young man, you just earned the only A in the class. You will make a fine trial lawyer because you aren't distracted by the incidentals."

When Jesus was asked why he taught with parables, he replied, "Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given." (Matt 13:11) His answer shows that he understood that those who sought understanding would see the point he was making. Others would be distracted by the incidentals.

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. (Matt 13:13)

Like other forms of literature, interpreting the parables is easy if you follow the rules. The most essential rule is to stick to the point, although the other rules are important. Jesus used at least 33 different parables. "But without a parable spake he not unto them." (Mk 4:34) Obviously, he wanted his followers to be able to understand the parables. Obviously, we can.

WIPE AWAY TEARS

Hundreds of thousands of words have been written debating various interpretations of the White Whale or Gabriel Garcia Marquez' magical realism in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Perhaps no other book, though, has prompted more (often contradictory) interpretations than the biblical book of the Revelation. Interpretations range from the fantastic (John predicts the development of the atom bomb) to the mundane (it is a history of the church in the First Century). Somewhere in between you can find an interpretation of your choice. Is it symbolic realism, or realistic symbolism? How much is literal and how much is symbolic? How much is predictive and how much is reflective? What is the nature of time; four times it says its events are soon to come to pass, and is soon fifty years or two thousand years?

Among the debates, even among those who believe that the majority of the events of the book took place in the First Century, is the nature of the final two chapters. If the New Jerusalem is heaven, then how can it come down out of heaven? If it is merely a picture of the church, how is it that people still die and there are hypocrites and murderers in the church?

The interpretation that fits best with the text of the book, as well as the historical context, is that all of the events described in the Revelation came to pass within the first two centuries surrounding the life of Jesus. Some of it may go back before his birth, but most is a picture of the church and the persecutions under the Roman government. If chapters 21 and 22 are symbolic descriptions of the church beginning at the Pentecost after Jesus was

crucified, how does one deal with such descriptive passages as "God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes"? (Rev 21:4)

As with much in the Revelation, this phrase is lifted from the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah was writing about the restoration of a remnant of the Jews when he said, "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces." (Isa 25:8)

John used the phrase earlier (Rev 7:17) in connection with those who were at that time loyally serving God. It is a beautiful picture, and does not in any way imply that God will permanently remove all things that cause tears. Even in the church there will be sadness, but God will wipe away our tears.

The picture is that of a mother and a child. The child is feeling hurt, physically or emotionally. The mother takes the child in her arms and wipes away the tears. The child is comforted in its mother's arms. The child may then go and play, and maybe even injure itself again. But the mother is still there to wipe away the tears and kiss the "boo-boo." God is likewise pictured comforting us. It may be once a day or once an hour, but He is always there for us.

Jesus described the same phenomenon, but comparing it to animals. Animals or people, mothers are mothers. They are there to wipe away our tears.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings. (Lk 13:34)

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