

## Conflicts In Bible Texts About Heaven and Hell

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Bible students occasionally are troubled by Bible passages that seem to be in conflict with other verses. I believe this “textual conflict” in the Bible is deliberate, beneficial, and purposefully frustrating.

God uses these conflicts to motivate sincere Bible students to keep studying so they obtain a deeper understanding of His Word. Since God speaks the truth (John 17:17), there must be a resolution for every conflict in Scripture. Resolving these conflicts may require much effort, but the ultimate result is very rewarding for the serious Bible student.

A textual conflict forces a “truth-seeking” Christian to make a decision. This Christian has to ask himself, “Is it academically honest to ‘cherry pick’ the Bible for verses that support my position? Does it please God if I ignore the texts that I cannot explain?”

Should I reach a temporary conclusion based on the weight of evidence as I understand it, or should I leave my conclusion unanswered until I can satisfactorily align everything the Bible says about a subject?” Ultimately, is the Christian willing to allow the Bible to reveal conclusions that he does not want to believe?

If a Christian seeking truth accepts the popular premise that the Bible contains conflicts (that is, one passage cancels the content of another passage), he is forced to admit that it can be manipulated according to bias, preconceptions, traditions, and prejudice. This admission only makes things worse, because ultimately, the Bible cannot be trusted if it is internally conflicted, has texts in opposition to each other, and can be made to say whatever someone wants it to say. If the Bible cannot be trusted, it has no value or authority.

On the other hand, if a seeker of truth believes God’s Word is consistent and truth is proven by the harmony that comes from the sum of all the Bible texts on a subject, then he has assurance that the Holy Spirit will provide a proper understanding in due time. Experienced Bible students know that apparent conflicts are beneficial because they require deeper study into God’s Word.

Precious stones generally do not lie on the surface of the Earth, but instead must be mined with substantial effort and determination from deep within the Earth. Mining God’s Word for hidden gems can take just as much effort. Many Bible concepts are easy to understand, but other elements may not be as easy. Even though textual conflicts can be frustrating, resolving them can be exciting because each discovery always proves to be a glorious gem just waiting to be exposed.

For example, I was puzzled for more than twenty-five years why two Passover feasts were observed during the week of Christ’s crucifixion. The gospels indicate that Jesus and His disciples observed the Feast of Passover in the upper room before His death (Luke 22:15) and the nation of Israel observed the Feast of Passover after Jesus was crucified. (John 18:28)

Knowing that God had said it was a sin to observe Passover at any other time than the appointed time (Numbers 9:13) and that Jesus never sinned (Hebrews 4:15), I could not understand what led the nation of Israel to sin by observing Passover at the wrong time.

My frustration disappeared when I discovered that two different calendars were used during the time of Christ and these two calendars are typically two days apart!\* Ironically, the discovery of two calendars occurred while I was working on another textual conflict. Sometimes, solving one conflict can lead to solutions for other conflicts!

**\*Note:** For an explanation of this matter, please see Chapter 6, “God’s Timing is Perfect,” in my book, Daniel: Unlocked for the Final Generation or go [HERE](#).

## The Difference Between Bible Review and Bible Study

For many Christians, “Bible study” actually means “Bible review.” Although Bible review is a very good thing to do, it differs from Bible study because Bible review is a limited process. When a Bible student reads verses to affirm ideas he already believes, it is Bible review.

True Bible study is an unlimited quest for truth. Bible study means to search the Bible with no restraint to determine what God’s character, love, plans, and will are all about. The Christian involved in sincere Bible study may prayerfully begin his study by saying, “Lord Jesus, I do not care what Your truth is or where it may lead, I just want to know and love your truth.” As you can see, Bible review (limited review) varies significantly from true Bible study (unlimited searching for the truth).

Very few laymen concern themselves with true Bible study because trusting “the experts” is easy to do. Each religious leader enjoys a measure of religious authority and/or leadership within his religious body and rightly so. However, laymen should be aware that clergy serve their denominations as “Defenders of the Faith.” Clergy do not want social unrest in the church or theological conflict.

When they are challenged on various topics, a clergyman will uphold the traditions of his church 99% of the time. The Protestant reformation ended more than a hundred years ago, but it appears that Christian leadership is returning to the Dark Ages. It seems that the majority of Protestantism has embraced the medieval concept that “the church” is to be exalted because truth is owned by the church.

This means that Protestant clergy primarily serve as “keepers of the church” rather than shepherds leading the flock toward greater light. To prove my point, ask your clergyperson to recount the last time new light came from the Bible and the whole church embraced it. I think many Protestant pastors have sacrificed the importance of unlimited Bible study on the “Altar of Unity.”

It is true that Christianity is much larger than ideas derived from “Bible study.” One does not have to travel the whole world to realize that Christianity is a mixture of cultural values, religious

ideas, and social interactions. When these properties are combined, they produce an enormous amount of inertia. Wouldn't it be great if each generation of Christians cleared its own piece of virgin ground, dug its own theological footers, and erected its own theological structures instead of occupying a paradigm built by previous generations?

When "Bible study" is limited to "Bible review," church members go away with the idea that Bible study is all about affirming and unifying what is already known. No student likes to study last year's text book. When Bible study is not fresh, challenging, and transforming, people lose interest because once the boundaries are known, there is no point of continuing more research.

However, seekers of truth have a very different relationship with the Bible. They want to see every facet of truth with their own eyes and understand it with their own minds. They are wary of traditions because they know there is Bible review and there is Bible study. They hunger for the fullness and beauty of Bible truth. They also know that they are pilgrims in this world and following the leading of the Holy Spirit is not optional.

There is no other way to arrive at truth than by following the directives of the Holy Spirit. (John 16:13)

Now that we have reviewed these concepts about the nature and importance of unlimited Bible study, let us consider some textual conflicts:

## **Does a Person Go to Heaven or Hell at Death?**

Millions of Christians believe that a person goes to Heaven or Hell at the time of death. The Bible teaches something different.\* When a person dies, two things happen. First, whether the dead person was good or evil, the breath of life (Hebrew: ruwach) returns to God who gave it and second, his body returns to dust. (Ecclesiastes 12:7)

This means that when a person dies, he ceases to exist. When Jesus came to Earth, He declared that He will resurrect all dead people. Those judged to be righteous will be resurrected at the Second Coming (John 6:40-44; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) and those judged to be wicked will be resurrected at the end of the 1,000 years. (Revelation 20:5; John 5:28,29; 12:48)

Because space is not available for a comprehensive study on death, judgment, and the two resurrections, these four passages will have to suffice.

\*Note: For more in-depth discussion on this matter, please see Chapter 13, "What Happens at Death?" in my book, *Jesus: The Alpha and The Omega* or go [HERE](#).

**"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten."** (Ecclesiastes 9:5)

**"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have**

**done evil will rise to be condemned.”** (John 5:28,29)

**“For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”** (John 6:40)

**“According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep.”** (1 Thessalonians 4:15)

If we allow the four statements above (one by Solomon, two by Jesus, and one by Paul) to mean that a dead person ceases to exist, and there is no intelligence while waiting for his resurrection, we find what appears to be a textual conflict with the book of Philippians. Paul appears to support the idea that upon his death, he would immediately be with Christ. As you study Paul’s words below, keep two things in mind.

First, Paul was languishing in a Roman prison when he wrote to the believers in Philippi and second, years earlier Paul had experienced the most wonderful experience that a human being can have. Paul was taken to Heaven in a vision (2 Corinthians 12:1-9), just like John (Revelation 4:1,2). With these two thoughts in mind, consider Paul’s words to the church at Philippi [insertions mine]:

**“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed [of Jesus and His gospel], but will have sufficient courage [when I am summoned before Caesar] so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is [to serve] Christ and to die is gain [is desirable].**

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me [even in prison]. **Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart [this world and be free of sin’s curse] and be with Christ [which I have already experienced], which is better by far [than my present circumstances]; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.**

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain [alive for as long as the Lord wants], **and I will continue with all of you [serving the Lord and praying] for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again [whether in person or in letters] your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.”** (Philippians 1:20-26, insertions mine)

Conflict resolved: The apparent conflict in Philippians comes from this phrase which is often understood to mean: **“I desire to depart [this world] and be with Christ [immediately].”** If this statement was the only mention which Paul had written on the topic of death, it would be reasonable to say that Paul believed that he would be with Christ at the time of death.

But, Paul also wrote 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15 where he clearly says that the righteous dead and the righteous living will be resurrected at the Second Coming. Moreover, the righteous living and the righteous dead will meet the Lord together in the air when He appears.

Therefore, we can resolve this conflict with this understanding of Paul's thoughts: "**I desire to depart** [this world] **and** [to once again] **be with Christ** [which will occur at the resurrection of all His saints]." This understanding of Philippians 1:20-26 aligns with the four statements by Solomon, Jesus, and Paul and the conflict is resolved.

In future months we will examine additional conflicts from more difficult passages.

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