

## Inside this Issue

EDITED BY IAN REES

### The Moral Maze

Page 1

### How to understand the Scriptures

Page 2

### Your God is too small

Page 4

### Ancient wisdom for a modern world

Page 8

All articles written by the Editor unless otherwise specified

# YPS

## (Young Precious Seed)

is a supplement of *Precious Seed* designed for those young in faith. Its purpose is to restate timeless truths from the word of God for a new generation of Christians and to kindle a biblical approach to current issues in the world in which we live.

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## ‘Wanna bet?’

What should the Christian’s attitude be to gambling, especially as the United Kingdom is facing the biggest shake-up in gambling laws it has ever seen, and the result of these changes will soon be obvious in holiday resorts, hotels and High Streets? Does the Bible have anything to say on the subject?



### A definition

We gamble when we become engaged in any activity that involves risk or uncertainty. In its general sense we can gamble with anything: we ‘gamble with our lives’, for instance, when we drive recklessly, or do something foolish. Now, whilst this is always ill-advised, it is gambling with money that should present Christians with moral problems. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* includes in its definition of gambling ‘to play games of chance with money; to stake money on some chance’. Gambling, in this sense, takes place when any amount of wealth changes hands on the basis of chance. Some may argue that there is a measure of skill involved but risk, chance or luck is usually what draws people in.

### ● A negative motivation

In order to entice us to part with our money, in the hope that we might increase it or gain something for it, prizes are usually offered. Cash jackpots in lotteries are usually massive; prizes in raffles, prize-draws or scratch-cards are often items most people could not afford. Here is the first problem with gambling – it arouses negative, if not sinful, emotions. The most important of these emotions are greed and covetousness – we are encouraged to dream for, and even long for, what would otherwise be out of our reach. But God forbids us to covet what is not our own. ‘Thou shalt not covet’, is the tenth commandment, and covetousness is idolatry says Paul in Colossians 3. 5. To covet what people cannot afford, yet entice them with the prospect of getting it for little expense is wrong. Instead, we should be encouraged to buy what we can afford, to be content with what we have if we cannot afford it, and never to lust after, or covet what is beyond our means. ‘Godliness with contentment is great gain’. A desire to win huge sums of money is at the root of all gambling, and ‘the love of money is the root of all evil’. Many who have been caught in its snare have ‘pierced themselves through with many sorrows’, 1 Tim. 6. 6-10.

### ● A crippling addiction

As with alcohol, drugs and tobacco, gambling in casinos, betting at the races, filling in the pools, buying lottery tickets, etc., is highly addictive. For many gamblers, the rush of excitement becomes intoxicating, leading to more and more gambling. It also leads to serious problems, for when

# How to understand the Scriptures

What does 1 Corinthians 15.29 mean by speaking of those 'baptized for the dead'? Who were the 'sons of God' in Genesis 6.2? What does it mean that Christ 'went and preached to the spirits in prison', 1 Pet. 3.19, or that it is impossible to renew some people to repentance, Heb. 6.6?

## Problem 1: What does the text mean?

There are many things in the Bible that we find hard to understand. It would, in fact, be a strange thing if we never struggled to understand the scriptures, for being God's word, they are not always easy reading. Six times in John chapters 13 to 16 the disciples failed to understand what the Lord was talking about. Peter misunderstood the Lord washing his feet, 13.6-10. The Lord reassured him, 'What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this'. Then the disciples were perplexed about the betrayal, 13.21-22; the Lord's departure, 13.36; where the Lord was going, 14.5; God's plans for the world, 14.22; and the resurrection, 16.16-19. This phenomenon is found in all the Gospels. The disciples regularly failed to understand the Lord's parables, prophecies of His coming death and His comments on numerous other subjects.

The preface to the Jerusalem Bible, a Roman Catholic translation, observes that the modern availability of the Bible has hardly diminished disagreement over what it means. Many true Christians have quite different views on what the Bible is saying on certain issues. The only place on earth where no one disagrees over scripture is in a cult.

## Problem 2: How does it apply to us today?

Sometimes we struggle in a second area. Perhaps we understand what we are reading but fail to see its relevance to us. For example, we may understand perfectly well what the words 'bring the cloak . . . and the books' mean, 2 Tim. 4.13, but is God saying something to us from this verse? Is there a moral for us from the story of David and Goliath? Must every church have seven deacons, Acts 6? Should believing lepers expect healing today, Matt. 8? Should we greet one another with a holy kiss, 2 Cor. 13.12, or sell all that we possess, Mark 10.21? Or were these simply specific or cultural injunctions that do not apply to us? If so, how do I distinguish between what applies to me today and what was simply a 1st century situation?

Understanding the meaning of scripture and its message today is not always easy. What should we do? Is it necessary to go to Bible College to properly understand God's word? Or should we simply accept everything taught by a particular authority: church, creed, commentary set or conference circuit? Should we abandon the doctrine of the perspicuity of the scriptures altogether?

## Three Important Principles

In following articles we will consider how we 1) understand the meaning of scripture, 2) apply the scripture, and 3) avoid the dangers in interpreting scripture. For the moment, let us set out three basic principles.

**Revelation.** The Lord promised His perplexed disciples that the 'Holy Spirit . . . will teach you all things', John 14.26, and 'guide you into all truth,' John 16.13. What better tutor could we ask for than the Author of scripture Himself? George Muller wrote, 'We must remember that



by Andrew Wilson

our own human intellect cannot fathom the scriptures. We must, in true humility of soul, wait upon God, that He, by His Spirit, would be pleased to instruct us'. Understanding the scriptures is not merely an intellectual exercise – it is a spiritual discipline, see particularly 1 Cor. 2. 9-16; but also John 6. 45, 2 Tim. 2. 7; 1 John 2. 27.

**Meditation.** Joshua 1. 8 and Psalm 1. 2 teach us that we must meditate in the scriptures day and night. This means to read the Bible carefully, continually and consecutively. We can hardly ask God to open our eyes that we may behold wondrous things from His law, Ps. 119. 18, if we never open the Bible. E. W. Rogers was reportedly once asked how to study the Bible. His answer was, 'Read it!' Reading the entire Bible regularly is a broad and liberal education that will prevent spiritual staleness or doctrinal pettiness and promote Christian growth and progress.

**Application.** Psalm 111. 10 says, 'a good understanding have all those who do his commandments'. The Lord warned, 'Take heed how you hear ... for whoever has, to him more will be given', Mark 4. 24-25. If we do not act upon the light we receive, why should God allow yet further light to break forth from God's word? God's blessing is upon those who obey what they hear, John 13. 17; Jas. 1. 25.

## Of books and helps

As in many areas of life, failure to get the basics right cannot be compensated for by advanced tools or technology. Lexicons, grammars, textual helps, translations, concordances, maps and dictionaries will give the Bible student some help. An argument could be mounted that all this knowledge could be gained by regular reading of the scriptures, but we cannot very well understand God's message to us if we do not accurately understand the meaning of the words He uses to convey it. J. N. Darby felt reassured – from 2 Timothy 4. 13 – that he should hold on to his books. Yet dependence upon human help produces sterile scholasticism that has, in the past, sometimes led many astray. The scribes of Christ's day could quote the various opinions of the learned rabbis, but not provide an authoritative word from God. On the other hand, we should not despise the gifts God has given other believers for our profit and blessing. Pride is another problem too – whether in one's own private interpretation or in a knowledge of books, pride in my learning or pride in my ignorance. Faith in God's help is paramount.

*To be continued*



## THE MORAL MAZE DILEMMA BOX

You are running a charitable project feeding homeless street children which has caught the attention of some non-Christians in the community. They are keen to help you financially and offer to give you all the proceeds from two fruit machines in the local casino. This could mean support of a couple of thousand pounds a month, and the project is costing you a lot of money. What would you do?



# Your God is too small! Essential truths

## What can God do?

'God Almighty' is a name, or an expression, with which many people are familiar. The truth of it is something with which we can never be too familiar. What does God have power to do?

## God has power in creation

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. With these majestic words the Bible contradicts all philosophies and theories of man that deny that a personal creator made the universe. The word of God clearly teaches that this world was made by God and for God. 'Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of thine hands', Heb. 1. 10; 'God ... made the world and all things therein', Acts 17. 24; God 'created the heavens and stretched them out, he spread forth the earth and that which cometh out of it, he giveth breath unto the people that walk therein', Isa. 42. 5. God Himself, speaking to Job, asked, 'Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?' Job 38. 4. 'By [his dear Son] were all things created, that are in heaven and that are in earth, visible and invisible', Col. 1. 16; John 1. 1-3.

Now, we all have a God-given ability to create things. It is true that some have more ability than others but we are all creative in our own way. Yet each one of us has to use materials to be creative. The artist uses paint, the sculptor stone, the knitter wool, the potter clay; we all use something to create something else. Yet God created something out of nothing. In the beginning, before there was anything at all, God merely spoke the word, gave a command,

and matter came into existence. What awesome power! 'God said, Let there be light: and there was light', Gen. 1. 3; 'He spake and it was done; he commanded and it stood fast', Ps. 33. 8-9; 'the worlds were framed by the word of God', Heb. 11. 2. God is the Creator.

## God has power over nature

Yet the universe continues day by day. Scientists have discovered the laws of nature, laws that do not change. Who made the laws of nature? The Creator, of course. He has made this world, and He continues to keep it going. The Son of God 'upholds all things by the word of his power', and 'by him all things consist', Col. 1. 17. Why are the laws of nature on the whole unbroken? Why does the universe continue on its way? Why doesn't the earth suddenly detach itself from its orbit and hurtle into oblivion? Because God created and continues to sustain His creation. He occasionally disregards the laws of nature, of course; after all, that is what a miracle is - when the Creator God over-rides the laws of nature for His own purposes.

God has power in His creation and He has power over it. On the one hand God could bring a flood upon the face of the earth and drown everything except for those He chose to save, Gen. 7-8; on the other hand, He withheld rain from His people and crippled their land with a drought in order to punish them for their rebellion. God sent out a great wind which whipped up a mighty tempest that nearly sank Jonah's boat; yet, on the other hand, when a storm rose up that nearly capsized the boat in which the Son of God and His disciples travelled, the Lord instantly calmed the raging sea with a word, Mark 4. 35-41. So dramatic was the death of His Son upon the cross that there was a violent earthquake, Matt. 27. 51-53. God can disturb and command nature itself.



# s about the attributes of God

## God has power over living creatures

Elijah the prophet needed to be fed in secret without anyone knowing where he was. Could God arrange that? Of course. He made ravens fly to where Elijah was and give him meat from their mouths, 1 Kgs. 17; He could preserve the life of Daniel, His servant, even in a den of lions and then destroy Daniel's enemies by those lions, Dan. 6; He could bring two bears out of a forest to kill youths who mocked His servant, 2 Kgs. 2, 23; He could make a donkey talk, Num. 22. 28. When Jonah was thrown into the sea, God prepared a great fish to come and swallow him up, then disgorge him onto dry land. God even prepared a plant to give Jonah shade, then He sent a worm to eat and destroy the plant. God has power over His creatures.

## God has power over things

God could make a metal axe-head float up from the bottom of the river where it had fallen, so that its user could restore it to its owner, 2 Kgs. 6. He could make a dead piece of wood, used for years by Aaron as a walking stick, to shoot buds and blossom overnight, Num 17. 8. He could send down fire from heaven to consume a sacrifice in order to prove He is God, 1 Kgs. 18. His Son could turn water into wine in a moment, when it was needed, John 2. 1-11. An humble soldier, in the middle of a battle, could shoot an arrow into the air, aiming at nothing in particular, and God could bring that arrow down onto His target, a rebellious king under His judgement, 1 Kgs. 22. 28-34.

## God has power over chance

Sometimes people draw straws to find out something – in the Bible people cast lots, or used the Urim and the Thummim, to discern the will of God in a matter. One day God instructed Joshua to bring all the people before Him tribe

by tribe, after a calamitous defeat at Ai, and the tribe of Judah was identified as being the problem. Then, family by family, the tribe of Judah passed by and the family of the Zarhites was identified. From them the household of Zabdi was identified, and from there the finger fell upon Achan; and of course it was Achan who had sinned and disobeyed God, Josh. 7. Was this chance? No, it was of God. When the sailors in Jonah's boat decided to draw lots to see who was responsible for bringing the ferocity of the storm upon them, the lot fell on Jonah. Was that chance, bad luck, misfortune? No. It was of the Lord, for, 'the lot is cast into the lap but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord', Prov. 16. 33. That is why Christians do not believe in luck, whether it is good luck or bad. It is God's over-ruling circumstance, sometimes called God's providence.

## God has power over politics

But what about the kingdom of men? Does God have a hand in that? Is He able to do whatever He wishes to do with men? Of course. God has power over politics. It is His hand that moves behind the scenes. 'He removes kings and sets up kings', Dan. 2. 21. God creates empires and overthrows them. 'I will turn, I will turn, I will turn', He says. He 'rules in the kingdom of men and gives [the kingdom] to whomsoever he will', Dan. 4. 17. God tells us He is able even to make people do what He wishes them to do in the fulfilment of prophecy. He had told His people through His prophet Jeremiah, that when they arrived in Babylon, the land of captivity, they would be there for seventy years in exile. At the end of those seventy years, 'in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation saying,



## What can God do?

'The Lord God of heaven . . . has charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem. Who is there among you of all his people? His God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel', Ezra 1. But Cyrus was not a believer in God. Was this hard for God to do? No, for 'the heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord, He moves it withersoever He will', Prov. 21. 1. God had said that His Son was to be born in Bethlehem. But Mary, the woman chosen to be the mother of the Lord, lived in Nazareth, as did Joseph to whom she was engaged. But just as Mary was coming to the end of her pregnancy, God ensured that Caesar Augustus, in Rome, made a decree that all the Roman world should be taxed and registered in their place of birth. Imagine the vast upheaval there was, as the whole civilized Roman world moved to register themselves, some of them having to travel vast distances. Why? So that Mary and Joseph would arrive in Bethlehem the very night on which Jesus was born, that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'But thou, Bethlehem, Ephratah . . . out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel', Mic. 5. 2.

The great tyrant Nebuchadnezzar's heart was filled with pride as he looked at his vast city of Babylon. God brought him down, and punished him for his pride, driving him out of his palace with a mental break-down that made him live like an animal in a field for seven years until he realized that 'the Most High rules in the kingdom of men and giveth it to whomsoever he will'. 'And at the end of the days, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and

I praised and honoured him that lives for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?' Dan. 4.

### God has power over life and death

'God . . . gives to all life, and breath, and all things', Acts 17. 25; 'the spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty has given me life', Job. 33. 4; God 'breathed into [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul', Gen 2. 7. He made barren women give birth, and shut up the wombs of others. Yet, He also has power over death. 'The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord', said Job after the deaths of his children, Job 1. 21. 'You fool, this night shall your soul be required of you', said God to a rich man intent on living a life without Him, Luke 12. 20. Our times are in God's hands.

### God is omnipotent

God can do anything; He is omnipotent. 'Our God is in the heavens, he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased', Ps. 115. 3. God Himself asked Abraham, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' Gen. 18. 14. Jeremiah's stated belief, 'Ah Lord God! behold, thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee', Jer. 32. 17, was challenged by the Lord when He replied, 'Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh: is there any thing too hard for me?', Job 32. 27. Job could say to God, 'I know that thou canst do everything', Job 42. 2. Our Lord Himself said to His disciples on one occasion, 'With God all things are possible', Matt. 19. 26. In fact,



He is 'able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think,' Eph 3. 20. 'All power (authority) is given unto me,' says our Lord, Matt. 28. 18.

## Yet, there are things God cannot do

We need to qualify the blanket statement 'God can do anything' by stressing that there are certain things God cannot do. It is true He can do all His holy will; He can do anything in accordance with His own nature. He is not compelled to do anything by any force outside Him. Yet His own nature does limit Him in one respect; He cannot be what He is not and He cannot do what He should not. God cannot lie, for instance. So we read, 'it is impossible for God to lie,' Heb. 6. 18; 'God is not a man that he should lie,' Num. 23. 19; 'The Strength of Israel will not lie,' 1 Sam. 15. 29; Titus 1. 2. Neither can He deny Himself. This means that He cannot break His promises. 'God cannot deny himself,' 2 Tim. 2. 15.

## God can do anything but sin

God cannot sin, neither can He be tempted to sin; 'God cannot be tempted with evil neither tempts he any man,' Jas. 1. 13. To do these things is to deny Himself, to go contrary to His nature, and God cannot do that. Neither, we should stress, could Christ. Though our Lord was man, unlike us He could not sin. He did not have that sinful nature within Him that responds to sin. Ah! you say. Then He doesn't know how I feel. If He was never tempted to sin, and never experienced that pull inside that breaks down all barriers, then He doesn't share the same humanity as I do, and He never faced the full force of the temptation. In Holland they build dykes, or dam walls, to hold out the sea. Imagine, then, a dam wall under tremendous pressure of waves and water. It bears the force, enduring it and resisting it time after time. Part of the wall eventually gives



way, and the water floods in. For that part of the wall, the pressure is over and gone. It has yielded. Yet further along the coast, another wall resists the pressure of the storm for hour after hour and never yields. Which wall faced the most pressure? The one that never yielded. So our Lord faced pressures you and I will never face, because we often give in long before the full force is felt, but He never did.

The constraints God faces, then, are all internal to Himself, never external. There is no power external to God that can force Him to do what He does not want to do. Where should that leave us? Firstly, we should rejoice that the most powerful Being in the universe is a righteous and a just God, One who cannot be turned to evil. Remember, too, that God's awesome power is harnessed by prayer and faith. God has said, 'If ye ask anything in my name, I will do it,' John 14. 14. He can move mountains to perform His holy will. Yet remember the secret of prayer is neither the much asking, though we must do that; nor is it the believing, though we must believe He is able to do what He wishes to do. The secret is in asking in His name. To ask in His name is not merely to tag the words, 'In Jesus Name,' on the end of our prayers as though they were some Christian incantation, or abracadabra. To ask in His name is to ask in accordance with His will. When we do that, we will find our prayers will 'move the hand that moves the world to bring deliverance down'.

GOD IS OMNIPOTENT

gamblers lose money, they often have to bet more in order to recover huge losses, and these invariably lead to massive and crippling debts. The word of God reminds believers that we must not be mastered by anything other than the Lord Himself, 1 Cor. 6. 12b. To put ourselves into the line of addiction to thrills, risks and the hope of good luck, is irresponsible.

### ● A dangerous escapism

Gambling leads to a reckless use of resources. The principle of buying and selling, of working hard to provide a livelihood and to care for a family, is a biblical practise. 'He that tills his land shall be satisfied with bread: but he that follows vain [things] (margin) is void of understanding'; Prov. 12. 11. God, however, reminds us that we are stewards of what He gives us. We are, therefore, to use our resources wisely, not recklessly. To spend hours hoping and praying for a windfall, and to spend resources in the pursuit of such hopes, is not responsible stewardship of God's resources.

### ● An unreal superstition

There is no such thing as luck whether it is good luck or bad. God is sovereign in His world, and gives to all what they need. It is far more wholesome for us as God's people to work hard, buy what we can afford, and to trust in God to provide what we need. Pagans and unbelievers think chance rules the world; Christians don't. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord'; Prov. 16. 33.

There are many ways of gambling, and also many degrees of it. The most extreme forms of gambling take place in casinos. The trouble is, that while no Christian would want to be found in a casino, it is possible to gamble in internet casinos and on gambling websites from home. The devil wants us to do many things in private that we would never do in public. But would you bet on sports results, fill in the pools, play for money with cards or bingo? Possibly not. Would you, then, buy a lottery ticket, buy or sell raffle tickets, play in the school tombola, participate in prize draws, play the fruit machines and slot machines on the pier, or send off for the prize on a scratch-card? Aren't these all forms of gambling as pay-outs are dependent upon luck or chance? You may say many of them are all for a good end – to raise money for the school, the hospital or charity. But can the end ever justify the means?

# Ancient Wisdom for a Modern World

Wise words from the book of Job

'I have escaped by the skin of my teeth', Job 19. 20



The English idiom 'escaped by the skin of one's teeth' is derived from this graphic expression in the book of Job. One of the main themes of the book is the problem of suffering. At the beginning of the book we find Job well blessed, with a large family, considerable wealth and great prospects. In the first and second chapters of the book, however, Job faces desperate grief as all his children die and he loses everything, including his health. Even his wife advises him to 'curse God and die'. Job, however, remains resolute. In the face of bereavement, he bows his head and says, 'the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord', and in response to the loss of everything he affirms, 'though he slay me, yet will I trust him'. In doing so he shows us that suffering is sometimes brought upon us to prove that our faith is real and that we are not fair-weather believers, loving God only when everything is well with us. Sometimes suffering comes, too, so that our response of 'faith-come-what-may' brings glory to God. In the end, God restores all to Job, and more besides.

To 'escape by the skin of one's teeth' has been used for centuries to mean 'to have a narrow escape'. Whether this is what the original Bible expression actually means is open to debate. It is, however, used in situations where survival or rescue is achieved at the last minute, or only just. Perhaps someone misses a flight that subsequently crashes, or climbs out of the wreckage of a write-off. It could also be used of someone who leaves it to the very last minute to get right with God, and yet succeeds in doing so. When a man or woman, who has lived a life without God, repents just before they die and rests all hope of peace with God in the death of Christ on the cross, it can be said of them that they were saved by the skin of their teeth. This is simply because the Bible always tells us to get right with God the moment we believe He is speaking to us, calling us to faith in Him and warns us not to leave it until tomorrow. We do not know whether we will see tomorrow. 'Now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation'; 2 Cor. 6. 2.

Two thieves were crucified with the Lord Jesus. One believed and trusted in Christ at the last moment. His experience shows that God can still receive a sinner who repents last minute, while there is yet life and consciousness, and asks to be saved from God's judgement on sin; but only one was saved, so that no one should presume that such vital matters as gaining peace with God should be left to the last moment. Don't bank on a death-bed conversion, will you? You may not be given one. If God is calling you, come now.