

HARD SAYINGS OF JESUS

Embracing His Words of Life

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BIBLE
Discovery
series

NORTHWESTERN PUBLISHING HOUSE
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Cover illustrations: Lars Justinen; GoodSalt, Inc.
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Northwestern Publishing House
1250 N. 113th St., Milwaukee, WI 53226-3284

www.nph.net

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Published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-8100-2713-8

ISBN 978-0-8100-2714-5 (e-book)

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INTRODUCTION

John 3:16—“*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*”

Matthew 11:28—“*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.*”

John 11:25,26—“*I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.*”

They called Jesus *teacher* during his earthly ministry. It's not hard to see why. As God's Son walked among us, his words did what the psalmist wrote about a millennium before: “The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple” (Psalm 119:130). Jesus taught “as one who had authority.” Long before telephone lines or cell phones could broadcast a message, Jesus' words gathered crowds by the thousands and the tens of thousands.

They still do. As you hold this book in your hand, I assume that you've come to know and believe in Jesus through his words or at least have been so intrigued by their message and power that you want to know more.

And perhaps you've found yourself running into a difficulty that's two thousand years old. Some of Jesus' words are hard. That's not what we might expect. God wants to communicate with us through the words of Christ. He speaks undeniable truth. And the sovereign Lord who designed the pathways of our minds and understanding knows well how to speak to us.

So why are Jesus' words so hard to understand at times? How can countless Christian denominations look at his words and disagree on what he's saying? Why can believers read the words of our loving Savior and wish he would have said something different? Different

Hard Sayings of Jesus

words of Jesus are difficult for us for different reasons. In this book, we'll consider Jesus' difficult words in three main groupings:

1. Sayings that are difficult for us to understand because of cultural differences or problematic translations
2. Sayings that we struggle with because they don't appear to be true
3. Sayings that we wouldn't expect from a loving God

This book is written for those who struggle with some of Jesus' words. I pray that includes you. His words are worth struggling with. At times we may need to grow in our understanding or leave behind our sins and portions of our worldviews, but in his word Jesus offers and gives us what he plainly says: *"Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Matthew 5:32 (KJV)—*“I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.”*

She holds the Bible in her hands, and it’s hard not to hate Jesus, at least a little. Not long after getting married, she realized that her husband wasn’t the man she thought he was. The caring and attentive man she dated was replaced by someone who was distant and cruel. She discovered that the time he spent on the computer late at night was used for looking at pornography. But through it all, she remembered the promise she made to God on their wedding day and the promises God made to her that he would use everything for her good. God could fix their marriage. God could make them stronger. Trusting in those promises, she was even willing to keep working on their marriage when she found out he had cheated on her with another woman. But he wasn’t willing. After her years of committed effort, he divorced her.

She didn’t resent Jesus for all of that. She understood that it wasn’t God who failed in her marriage; her husband had failed. She could bear that pain. But Jesus’ statement in Matthew chapter 5 seemed too cruel: “Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery.” Her adulterous husband went on to have another relationship, but in those words it sounded like her Savior was punishing her. As faithful as she’d been, she would either have to live the rest of her life without the blessing of a husband or become an adulteress herself.

Poor Translations Can Make Jesus’ Words Difficult to Hear

That’s not what Jesus is really saying. Jesus likely spoke in Aramaic during his teaching and preaching ministry two thousand years

ago. The accounts of his life and teachings (the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) were written down in Greek. Jesus' words are just as true and relevant today, but we read them in translations. Many of those translations are very good and trustworthy, but none of them is perfect. And small errors in translation can lead to some very big problems.

Jesus' words in Scripture about divorce and remarriage are a good example of this. Perhaps you've come across these words before and wondered why Jesus seems to be punishing the "innocent party" in a divorce. Maybe you've heard churches or preachers saying that once someone is divorced, it's sinful for them to ever marry again (even if they were the ones who were abandoned). Maybe you've been in that situation and struggled with these words of Jesus too.

It's important to deal with what Jesus actually said. As strong a translation as the King James Version (KJV) is, it doesn't seem to handle this passage correctly. (The New International Version [NIV 1984 or 2011] doesn't do much better either.) When the KJV translates the verse as saying, "Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced *committeth adultery*," Jesus used a rare verb form that doesn't occur anywhere else in the New Testament. Based on a few similar verb forms—and a similar statement from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy—a more accurate translation would seem to say that whoever marries a divorced woman "causes her to be seen as an adulteress."

Jesus' words in Matthew chapter 5 aren't punishing a woman who was left by her husband. Jesus is recognizing the terrible damage that can be done by an unfaithful spouse. To all onlookers, an unfaithful man may seem like a loving and faithful husband; they don't know that he has been untrue to his marriage promises. When he divorces his wife, the assumption that many would make is that she must have done something wrong. When she eventually gets remarried, they assume she'd been unfaithful to her first husband, possibly with this new man. Her first husband's loveless, selfish actions have "caused her to be seen as an adulteress." Jesus warns against that, not because he wants to keep the innocent party from another marriage but because he wants to protect them from that kind of slander and false judgment.

Over the centuries, how many people have struggled with these words of Jesus that seem so harsh and unkind? How many innocently divorced people have been told by church leaders or well-meaning Christian friends that they could never marry again? How many have held a Bible in their hands during one of the most difficult times in their lives and found themselves resenting Jesus, at least a little? Yet in those words Jesus wasn't laying another burden on that poor woman. He was there in his Word as the one who cares about that woman's reputation and now sympathizes with her in the challenge she faces. He wasn't forbidding the woman from remarrying; he was warning the husband about the full impact of his sinful actions.

Sometimes the struggles we have with Jesus' words aren't really with Jesus' words. Some of the struggles are with imperfect translations. That's why it's important to have faithful translations and well-trained clergy who can continue to study God's Word in the original languages so we can always make sure we hold to what Jesus really says.

Poor Traditions Can Make Jesus' Words Difficult to Understand

Matthew 19:24—*“Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”*

The city of Jerusalem is surrounded by massive walls. To enter the city, you pass through one of the large main gates. Those gates are closed at night. Any travelers who come to the city at night need to enter through a different door, set low in the wall. This door is small, like the eye of a needle.

So the story goes. For at least five hundred years, Bible commentators and preachers have pointed to these “eye-of-a-needle” gates to help explain Jesus' comments in Matthew chapter 19. A camel could enter through such a gate, but it wouldn't be an easy process. The bags, treasures, and riches on his back would need to be unloaded. The camel would need to get down on his knees and make

the difficult entrance. Do you see the comparison to a rich man? It's his riches that keep him from the kingdom of God. He can enter, but it won't be easy. He must unburden himself of his riches, get on his knees, and make the difficult entrance.

The eye-of-a-needle gates don't actually exist, however. There are some small gates in the city walls of Jerusalem, but those were built much later than Jesus' time. There is no indication in Scripture or in the historical record that any gates in the walls of Jerusalem were referred to as the eye of a needle.

Just like poor translations can cause unneeded struggles with Jesus' words, poor traditions can make it difficult to understand Jesus too. Over the years explanations and interpretations that often have no truth to them have been attached to passages. The "mark of Cain" (Genesis 4:15) has been explained as God giving the first murderer black skin. (The Hebrew text doesn't say that God put a mark on Cain but that he gave Cain a sign.) Jesus' response to Peter's confession of faith (Matthew 16:18) is interpreted as Jesus setting up Peter and his successors as earthly leaders of the church on earth. (Jesus says nothing about Peter's successors. His words are actually referring to Peter's beautiful confession that Jesus is the Son of God.) Traditionally, many have interpreted Jesus' words about the eye of a needle as him telling the rich to get rid of their wealth.

Take away that incorrect tradition about Jesus' words and what do you have? This time you have a saying of Jesus that actually gets *harder*. A camel can't pass through the eye of a needle. It's impossible. Does that mean that it's impossible for a rich man to enter heaven?

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples immediately after his conversation with a "rich young man." It's a touching and heartbreaking exchange. A young, wealthy man seemed earnestly to want to live a godly life. He strove to keep the commandments and thought—with no hint of self-glorification—that he truly had. Jesus looked at the young man and loved him (Mark 10:21) but realized that this man's heart wasn't as focused on God as the young man thought. When Jesus told the man to give away his wealth, this young man went away sad, finally realizing that he loved his money more than he loved God.

You can be rich and enter heaven. Scripture makes that clear. Abraham, David, Solomon, Job—Scripture is filled with examples of believers who had great wealth as a blessing from God. But you can't love money more than God and enter heaven. Love of earthly wealth is such a subtle sin that an earnest, God-seeking young man didn't even realize the hold it had on his heart. So Jesus speaks words of crushing law to reveal that sin—for the young man and for us. It's a hard saying, but not because it's so difficult to understand. It's hard because it brings a harsh warning for all of us.

Life in this world is messy and complicated. Divorce is difficult. Wealth can be deceitful. But Jesus speaks clear and honest truths. After clearing away the clutter of bad translations and incorrect traditions, may God grant us hearts to hear and follow his Word.