WHEN THE PIECES DON’T FIT
Making Sense of the Puzzles of Faith
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LIFE’S CONFUSING PUZZLES

BLUE SKY

Opportunity seldom knocks twice.

Strike while the iron is hot.

He who hesitates is lost.

Do not answer a fool according to his folly, or you will be like him yourself. (Proverbs 26:4)

GREEN TREE

Look before you leap.

Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Better safe than sorry

Answer a fool according to his folly, or he will be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:5)
Life’s Confusing Puzzles

Imagine putting together a 500-piece puzzle of a cloudless blue sky reflected in a calm lake surrounded by green trees. You search and search for a blue piece for a section of the sky. Unable to find the piece that fits, you begin trying any piece on the table. To your surprise, the piece that fits is green. A tree branch was jutting into the sky right at that spot in the picture.

Sometimes life is like a confusing puzzle of blue sky and green tree pieces. God promises rest and yet sends trials. He promises that in losing our lives we’ll gain them. He says the poor are rich. These pieces don’t seem to fit. But is it possible that these concepts—like blue sky and green tree puzzle pieces—fit unexpectedly?

Proverbs That Don’t Seem to Fit

Folk proverbs are like puzzle pieces that don’t seem to fit. They capture truth, but usually only one side of it. For example, is it better to “look before you leap” or to “strike while the iron is hot”? It doesn’t make sense that opposite ideas can both be true. Yet we know from experience that they are. Like blue sky and green tree pieces, they don’t look as if they fit. But they do. If I’m at a garage sale and I find an antique plate that matches one I already have, I need to “strike while the iron is hot” because if I hesitate it will be lost. This opportunity won’t knock twice. But if I’m looking for a house and I find one I like, I know it is prudent to have the home inspected for structural problems. I look before I leap. In fact, I’d be a fool to rush into that purchase. It’s far better to be safe than sorry!
As the author of Ecclesiastes said, there is “a time to be silent and a time to speak, a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace” (3:7b–8). There is a time to “look before you leap” and a time to “strike while the iron is hot.”

**BIBLE PIECES THAT DON’T SEEM TO FIT**

The Bible has many confusing concepts that are like blue sky and green tree puzzle pieces. In the book of Proverbs, we read, “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (26:4). But the very next verse says, “Answer a fool according to his folly” (26:5). How can two statements that say opposite things fit together as part of one truth? Do we answer a fool according to his folly or not? The second part of verse 4 says, “or you will be like him yourself.” The second part of verse 5 says, “or he will be wise in his own eyes.” Verse 4 is telling us not to stoop to the level of a fool, whereas verse 5 is telling us that sometimes folly must be plainly exposed and denounced. Both proverbs are true, but neither is universal; they apply to different circumstances.

Jessica is a mean, middle-school girl who said to her classmate Sally, “We can’t hang out with you. You stink!” If Sally answered by saying, “Well, you stink, too!” she would be answering folly with folly, and thus responding on Jessica’s level. If Sally says nothing at all, Jessica will be wise in her own eyes. It would be better for Sally to answer Jessica according to her folly (that is, in a way Jessica can understand). Sally might say, “Now that I see how you act, I don’t want to hang out with you.”

The verses in Proverbs suggest that we should not answer
foolish people in the same way they talk to us, but in a way
that points out their folly. The two pieces can be confusing
until we realize that each captures one side of the same truth.
Joined together, they solve an important life puzzle.

The opposite of a correct statement is a false
statement. But the opposite of a profound
truth may well be another profound truth.
(Niels Bohr, Danish physicist, 1885–1962)

COMMON PUZZLES

When the Bible or folk proverbs give conflicting
advice, we have difficulty deciding which to follow. As
a psychologist, I often work with people who get stuck
between two pieces of a life puzzle.

“I’m so torn,” said John. “My wife wants to move across
town but my son doesn’t want to leave our neighborhood
and all his friends. If I make my wife happy, my son will
be disappointed. I feel as if I have to choose between them,
and I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m so depressed,” said Steve. “I always wanted to be a
coach, but my Dad had other ideas for me. He always wanted
me to “make something” of myself, and coaching isn’t what
he had in mind. I’m miserable in my present job, but my
Dad will be miserable if I quit my job and become a coach.”

“I can’t win,” said Sara. “Either I take the promotion and
make my friend jealous, or I keep the only good friend I have
at work and make my boss mad—and maybe lose my job.”
“My family is dysfunctional and my friends keep moving away,” said Lisa. “I want friends, but if I get close to someone new, they’ll just leave.”

CHRISTIAN PUZZLES

In addition to life’s common puzzles, the Bible introduces puzzles that can be even more troublesome. Jesus said, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. . . . Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:39–42). Does this mean that when my neighbor borrows my new saw and doesn’t return it, I can’t ask for it back? Does Jesus mean that we give up all rights when we follow Him, or are there some rights that we retain? How do we solve this puzzle?

I have worked with many Christians who think that doing everything for everyone else is what Jesus always wants them to do. They think God requires them to love others and not themselves. They see their wants as being in conflict with God’s, and they are certain that it is either their wants or God’s. The very question “God or me?” assumes that Christians have to choose between two opposite thoughts.

EITHER–OR

I once saw a cartoon that showed a judge saying to jurors: “Your decision has to be either ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty.’ I can’t accept ‘too close to call.’”
Like guilt and innocence, some things in life are “either-or.” Either you’re a male or you’re a female. Either you’re here or you’re there. One is true and the other is false.

The Old Testament story of two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16–28) is an example of an “either-or” truth. Two women were claiming one son as their own. Solomon knew that only one of the women could be right, so he devised a clever test to determine the real mother.

There are many “either-or” truths for Christians. Either Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is enough for the forgiveness of our sins or it isn’t. Either we serve God or we don’t. Jesus said, “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matthew 6:24). Either we live a life holy to God or we don’t. Either we engage in the “acts of the sinful nature” or we live by “the fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:19–23).

Many of us prefer either-or thinking. Like the judge, we want a clear verdict. Choosing one option is easier than balancing or blending two or more. We are more comfortable when we don’t have to live in the tension of truths that seem contradictory. We prefer clear choices where one side is clearly true and the other side clearly is not.

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn’t give clear “either-or” teaching in some areas. For example, we know that Jesus claimed to be God but He also was born human and He died human. Which is it? Is Jesus God or man? He is both. Jesus was one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man. But how can this be? These opposites don’t seem to fit together.

What causes rain? Condensation or God? It’s not either-or; it’s both. God put the laws of nature in motion...
and keeps them going (Colossians 1:16–17). Both God and the laws of nature cause rain. Is a coin heads or tails? It’s not one or the other; it’s both. Heads and tails make up a single coin.

In his letter to believers in Rome, Paul wrote about Christians who disagreed as to what foods were acceptable to eat. Some refused to eat certain foods, and others maintained that “all food is clean” (Romans 14:20). Furthermore, some Christians considered certain days sacred whereas other Christians considered all days the same.

The important teaching in both regards is that we not judge others for their opinions and that we not cause immature believers to stumble in their Christian walk. Both teachings assume that it’s okay to have different opinions and practices. Even though we prefer that only one side be true, some issues are not clear-cut. Some biblical teachings are like proverbs: they present opposing concepts and we’re expected to resolve them. We’re expected to figure out how blue sky and green tree pieces fit together.

A man does not prove his greatness by standing at an extremity, but by touching both extremities at once and filling all that lies between them. (Blaise Pascal, Pensées)

**BOTH–AND**

Many puzzles are solved not by choosing one idea over another but by blending two ideas to form a third.¹
Life’s Confusing Puzzles

Jesus often presented two sides of an issue without saying exactly how to harmonize them. For example, the Pharisees and the Herodians set up an “either-or” trap for Jesus when they asked Him if they should pay taxes to Caesar. The Pharisees were opposed to Roman rule and the Herodians supported Roman rule. They wanted to trap Jesus into betraying His allegiance either to Rome or to Israel so Jesus would get in trouble with at least one of their groups. Jesus solved their puzzle by saying: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” (Matthew 22:21). He did justice to both points of view by combining them in an unexpected way.

Another time Jesus said that “anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:22). In a letter to believers in Ephesus, Paul laid out the other piece: “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry” (Ephesians 4:26). So is it okay to get angry? Do you have to choose either Jesus or Paul? Or can you solve the puzzle by agreeing that both statements are about resolving conflicts as soon as possible and not letting them grow into murderous thoughts and plans?

Jesus said, “Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear” (Matthew 6:25). Christians in Thessalonica were living this out to the letter and not working or preparing for the future, so Paul said, “If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). In other words, we shouldn’t worry but we should work for what we eat and drink.
BOTH ARE TRUE AT DIFFERENT TIMES

The Platte River in Colorado has the reputation of being a mile wide and an inch deep. In summer, it's shallow. But in spring after a snowy winter, it flows deep. Depending on where you are and what time of year it is, the same river looks very different. The Platte River is both deep and shallow, depending on when and where you look at it.

This kind of both-and blend is found in the Bible too. Sex is both good and wrong; within marriage it is good; outside of marriage it is wrong (Exodus 20:14). Obedience to authorities is both good and wrong (Romans 13:1). Even non-Christian authorities are servants of God (v. 4) whom we are to obey. However, we do not have to obey if they tell us to stop preaching (Acts 5:29). And though Jesus did not defend himself to the authorities (Matthew 26:63), Paul did (Acts 24).

BOTH ARE TRUE AT THE SAME TIME

Seeming opposites can also be true at the same time. For example, rain comes from both condensation and from God. Health comes from medications and ultimately from God. We have been “predestined” to be adopted as God’s sons (Ephesians 1:5), and God invites “whoever” to come to Him (John 3:16–18). We are saved by grace through faith, and “not by works” (Ephesians 2:8–9), and faith is dead unless accompanied by actions (James 2:17). We are free in Christ (Galatians 5:1), and “everything is permissible—but not everything is beneficial (1 Corinthians 10:23).
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**BLUE SKY**

Condensation causes rain.

Medicine cures disease.

We are predestined to salvation.

We are saved by faith alone.

We are free in Christ.

Honor yourself.

**GREEN TREE**

God causes rain.

God cures disease.

God invites whomever to come to Him.

Faith is dead without works.

Not all things are beneficial.

Honor others.

**NEITHER IS TRUE**

When our family was climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa, we overheard a Tanzanian guide discussing breakfast plans with some Italian climbers. The guide kept repeating, each time more loudly, “Do you want one hegg or two hegg?” One of the Italians kept repeating “No eggs please.” Finally, the guide understood that neither of his two choices was acceptable to the climber.

I often work with clients who struggle to understand why God allowed something bad to happen to them. The either-or options they are working with go something like this. Either I can trust God because He shows His love in predictable ways. Or I can’t trust God because He is unpredictable and sometimes seems to behave in unloving ways. These either-or opposites set up many Christians for losing their trust and faith in God when something bad happens to them. The reality is that neither of these opposites is true. The truth lies elsewhere—in God’s incomprehensible love for us, which He may express in
unexpected ways. Sometimes people need to look at the puzzle pieces differently. Sometimes their beliefs need to change.

BLENDING THE TRUTHS

A parable attributed to John Godfrey Saxe helps us understand the puzzle pieces of our lives. In Saxe’s parable, one blind man touches the elephant’s trunk and says the elephant is like a snake. Another blind man touches the elephant’s knee and says the elephant is like a tree trunk. The third blind man touches the elephant’s tail and says the elephant is like a rope. Each blind man was correct in describing one aspect of an elephant. But an elephant isn’t only snake-like, trunk-like, or rope-like. An elephant is like all three. The seeming “opposites” have to be blended together to solve the puzzle.

Some issues in the Bible are similar. They seem to have two sides that are both true. These are most likely both-and puzzles. For example, the Bible is clear that Jesus is both human (Romans 5:17) and divine (Matthew 26:63–64; Philippians 2:6). These look like opposites but the Bible insists that both are true simultaneously. There are cults that do not blend the opposites and throw out one side or the other. For example, Mormonism teaches that Jesus was not God. Christians harmonize the seeming opposites: Jesus is both God and Man. It is the same with the Trinity. It is clear in the Bible that God is both One (Deuteronomy 6:4) and Three (Matthew 3:16–17). Christians synthesize these opposites whereas the Jewish faith does not. The Jewish
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faith maintains that God is One and can’t be anything other than One. Christians believe that God is both One and Three simultaneously. The opposites are blended.

WHEN IS A PUZZLE NOT A PUZZLE?

The Bible has confusing puzzles, but it also has some truths that don’t need solving. For example, Scripture states that all humans have sinned (Romans 3:23) and that the only way to God is through Jesus (John 14:6). Over and over in the Bible we find that Christ’s death and resurrection are the basis for salvation (e.g., Titus 3:5–6). Although it’s surprising that God loves us so much that He sent His own Son to die for us, there is no doubt that we enter a relationship with God through Jesus.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Some Christians prefer not to deal with confusing puzzles. Perhaps their theology is “working” in their present circumstances. Maybe they don’t have time. Or perhaps they fear generating the wrong answers or putting the pieces together the wrong way.

None of us wants to be wrong about our faith. We don’t want to displease God. Trying to solve biblical puzzles seems risky. Yet we deal with risks every day that range from minor to major. We take a risk whenever we try a new breakfast cereal or a new bank. We learn to manage these risks. When we traveled to Asia, we managed the risk of malaria by taking anti-malaria medicine. Whenever we
drive a car, we flirt with death. But we manage that risk by taking driving lessons, learning traffic laws and safety rules, taking a test to get a license, obeying traffic signs and signals, supporting law enforcement officials, and wearing our seatbelts. By managing the risk, most of us survive our daily brush with death.

THE ESSENCE OF GOD IS LOVE

God showed Himself to Moses by passing before him and introducing Himself as “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished. . . .” (Exodus 34:6–7). We often repeat “For God so loved the world. . . .” (John 3:16) and “God is love” (1 John 4:16). We know that God is our Father who delights in giving us the desires of our heart (Psalm 37:4), good gifts (Matthew 7:11), and wisdom (James 1:5). We know that both the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26–27) and Christ (Romans 8:34) are interceding for us. So does God suspend His love for us when we’re stuck in one of life’s puzzles? No! According to the apostle Paul,

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? [Or feeling stuck?] . . .
For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the
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present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation [like feeling stuck in a life puzzle], will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35, 38–39)

We never eliminate the risk of being wrong, but we manage the risk by asking God for wisdom and by trusting our loving, all-knowing Father who cares deeply for our well-being.
QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

- List some puzzles found in the Bible.

- Pick one of the Bible’s puzzling truths and discuss possible solutions.

- Why do you think Jesus made puzzle-like statements?

- Which puzzles do you find most problematic? Why?