

“Hard to Believe”

by John MacArthur

Book excerpts for discussion at our Bible study

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pp. 32-33:

“Almost no one tolerates the exclusivity and supremacy of Christ these days, even some who profess to be Christians. The message of the cross is not politically correct—it’s the singularity of the gospel, on top of everything else, that bothers people. Can you imagine for a moment what might happen if a celebrity or political leader just said, ‘I’m a Christian and if you’re not, you’re going to hell’? Yikes!

“And then imagine if he said, ‘And the Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and all the people who believe they can earn salvation, whether liberal Protestants or Roman Catholics, and all the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses—you’re all going to eternal hell. But I care about you so much, I want to give you the gospel of Jesus Christ, because it is far more important than wars in the Middle East, terrorism, or any domestic policy.’

“You can’t be faithful *and* popular, so take your pick.”

p. 40:

“I’ve heard this proposal often through the years. If only some famous person could get saved, just think about the power his testimony would have! Or if this famous athlete or personality in the media, the arts, or politics could only be a Christian, just imagine the impact of his testimony. But it doesn’t work that way. ... posturing from positions of prestige can’t compensate for the distastefulness of the message or overcome the stubbornness of the sinner’s will. Besides, what recording artist or movie star is going to be willing to stand up at the Grammy or the Oscars and share the gospel? The audience would boo him off the stage. He can thank Jesus for winning, but pandemonium would ensue if he proclaimed the truths of hell, sin, repentance, and salvation only in Jesus Christ.”

pp. 42-43:

“Paul called those who carry and preach the treasure of the true gospel *ostrakinos*, translated here as ‘earthen vessels.’ ‘Earthen vessel’ is frankly too dignified a term; not that it’s very dignified, but it’s too dignified to translate the world *ostrakinos*. This is a cheap baked clay pot, unrefined, ugly, breakable, replaceable, valueless. It’s the little pot in which you put your plants. ... We’re baked dirt, that’s what we are, carrying around the message of God’s eternal kingdom of light and life.”

p. 60:

“Of course, Jesus knew what their reaction would be. But did He tailor His remarks to please the crowd? Did He safeguard His reputation by telling them what they wanted to hear and what would make them comfortable? Did He ignore the truth in favor of their little felt needs? No, He told the ragged and unadorned truth and let the chips fall where they would. In doing that He gives us the best example, the perfect example, of preaching the gospel, remaining faithful to the truth, even though His oldest friends and closest relatives tried to kill Him for it. It takes strong indictment to turn your nearest and dearest against you this fast. Yet after one sermon, they had become a lynch mob wanting to kill Jesus!”

p. 64-65:

Luke 4:25-30 I [Jesus] assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed--only Naaman the Syrian." All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

“God answered Elijah with a drought that lasted three-and-a-half years. In Luke 4:25-26, Jesus reminded His listeners of the fact that God sent Elijah to a destitute widow in the town of Zarephath at the height of the drought, and he told her in the name of the Lord that if she shared the last of her food with him, the Lord would supply all her needs until the rains returned. She was obedient to the true God, despite having only enough flour and oil for one meager, final meal for herself and her son. She gave Elijah the food he requested.

“This was a life-and-death decision for her. With no other support, she expected to starve after they had eaten the last morsels in the house. Sharing what little they had with this stranger would bring them to their desperate end even sooner. Yet, because she was obedient, God showed her His mercy, and from then until the drought was over, He miraculously replenished her flour bin and oil jar every day.

“This story infuriated the Jews, because the widow of Zarephath was a Gentile in a culture that worshipped Baal, yet God bypassed many needy widows in Israel and sent Elijah only to this woman, who had made no effort at all to observe the religious laws with which the Israelites were so obsessed. It was her individual faith in the true God that mattered...”

pp. 65-66:

“And Luke 4:27 says that God cleansed none of the lepers except Naaman the Syrian.

“Oh, man, did the Jews hate this story! Naaman was a military commander in chief of a land known as Aram. He commanded terrorists who were always pillaging Israel. They crossed the border, carried out their raid, killed Jews, and took men and women prisoners back to Syria to use as slaves. Naaman was a violent enemy leader, like the modern Palestinian militants who attack the Jews. What’s more, he was a Gentile, and he was a leper! He was about as despicable as people get.

“On one of his raids, described in 2 Kings 5, he captured a girl and brought her back to be a slave to his wife. Amazingly, the girl had a compassionate attitude; she knew about his leprosy, and she told him he needed to go to Israel to find the man of God named Elisha, because God could heal through him. Naaman began to believe in the power of the God of Israel, and eventually, through a series of events, he wound up meeting Elisha.

“Elisha said the God of Israel would heal Naaman if he immersed himself in the river seven times. ... Naaman was thinking, ‘How will I ever know unless I submit to what He asks? In my desperation, my destitution, and my disease, I have to do what the man tells me to do. Then I’ll know whether he’s the man of God and Israel’s God is the True Deliverer.’”

pp. 68-69:

“There’s only one reason why people who know the truth of the gospel are not willing to repent and believe. It is because they will not see themselves as the poor, prisoners, blind, and oppressed. It has nothing to do with the style of music your church offers, the drama and skits you stage, or the quality of your laser light show. It has everything to do with the spiritual deadness and blindness of pride. God offers nothing to people who are content with their own condition, except judgment. If you don’t think you are headed for hell, don’t think you need forgiveness, you put no value on the gospel of grace.

“You can’t preach salvation, lead anyone to salvation, or be saved yourself unless you’re willing to be humiliated and recognize your sinful condition.”

pp. 76-77:

“John Stott wrote in *Basic Christianity* ... ‘When I’m interviewed by a TV network, or in any fast-paced situation where I’ve got to make my point in a fifteen-second sound bite, I want to say two black-and-white things: I want to proclaim the absolute and single authority of Scripture, and the absolute exclusivity of Jesus Christ. It’s kind of like a response to the electronic version of Broadway producer David Belasco’s challenge: “If you can’t write your idea on the back of my business card, you don’t have an idea.” Like it or not, I’ve got only a few seconds to make my point, and that forces me to think about what are the most important, most fundamental tenets of the faith.’

“... I’d better know what I think. I think the world needs to know the Bible is the only truth of God, and Jesus Christ the only Savior.

“... When I was on the air with Deepak Chopra, he wanted to engage me in a battle over New Testament manuscripts. Another time, a Catholic priest tried to debate the meaning of a parable. I let them have their turn—politely, I hope—and then changed the subject back where it needed to be: authority of Scripture and exclusivity of Christ.”

p. 83:

“And it isn’t enough to say, ‘I was born in a Christian family, I’ve been in church all my life.’ As Laurence J. Peter mused, being in church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than being in the garage makes you a car.”

p. 89:

“When somebody commits a crime, he is caught and waits in prison for the final adjudication and sentencing.

“That final sentencing will come when Christ returns in His glory. He will come for His church, but His glory will not be manifest in the earth. The church will disappear in the Rapture, followed by a terrible time of Great Tribulation, and then Jesus will come back in shining glory. At the Second Coming, He will return to earth to set up His rule in full display of the glory of the Father...”

p. 93:

“The life we live, not the words we speak, determines our eternal destiny.

“To come to God on God’s terms requires us to recognize our own total unworthiness and inability, and that means the death of pride and self. That’s hard because this fallen world, with its selfish bias, constantly tells us that we ought to love ourselves.”

p. 95-96:

“... I am convinced that the visible church today is literally jammed full of people who aren’t Christians but don’t know it. When I hear statistics such as two billion people in the world are Christians and two billion aren’t, then I wonder who has established the criteria for being Christian. The Bible says many take the broad road, but few take the narrow way to Christ. Most opinion polls report that almost half of the American people claim to be born-again Christians, but that doesn’t square with the Scripture.

“... We have multitudes of deceived people who are bouncing along on the Jesus bandwagon and thinking everything is swell. For them, judgment is going to be one big surprise.”

p. 113:

Matthew 7:19-25 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit

you will recognize them. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.

“Sometimes God has to shock us into obedience by knocking us off our foundations. Possibly the only good thing about earthquakes in our California community is that they drive people to Christ. Rich or poor, famous or anonymous, they are petrified by their inability to control even the ground on which they walk. They come face-to-face with their powerlessness over the Creator Lord. Church attendance always goes up after a big quake, and in every case we see individuals, families, and couples come to Christ. Of course, some merely go through the motions, but for others it’s the final push they need to repent before God’s power.”

p. 113:

“I saw an article in a magazine recently that asked, ‘What are pastors going to do with the new wave of unmarried Christians who are living together?’ I questions whether that can be true among Christians. Before we get concerned about who’s living together, we had better be concerned about who’s really a Christian.”

p. 115:

Luke 9:59-60 He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

“What’s interesting about that is his father wasn’t even dead. He was actually thinking ‘Let me go home and wait for the inheritance, then, soon as I get my money, I’m coming.’ ‘Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”’ He was saying, ‘You let the world take care of its own; you come and preach the kingdom.’”

p. 115:

“Sometimes we make the gospel so easy that it’s no gospel at all. We Christians stew about how hard it is to follow up with new converts. One large church in America reported it had 28,000 conversions in a year, baptized 9,600 people, and had 123 join the church. The fact is that 28,000 people weren’t saved if only 123 joined the church. The

problem is not the difficulty of follow-up; the problem is the difficulty of conversion. We're trying to follow up with people who never were redeemed."

p. 125:

"The first characteristic of a genuine disciple is that he is like his Lord. He bears the character of Christ. That's why in Acts 11:26 people called the believers Christians: *Christiani*—'iani' means 'belonging to the party of.' They were little Christs; they manifested His character and bore the marks of His life in them. A true Christian not only wears the name of Christ, but he demonstrates the virtue of Christ.

"... A true disciple acts like Christ. Of course, there'll be lapses because of our humanness, but nonetheless there will be evidence of Christlikeness in the life of a true believer."

p. 130:

"It is the refiner's fire that consumes. It brings the shepherd's separation of the sheep and the goats. It brings the husbandman's fan when he throws the grain into the air and the chaff is blown away. The entrance of Christ splits and tears apart. If Christ had never come, the earth would have gone on in unity, doomed to hell. But when He came, a war broke out.

"... He came to bring a sword, not peace, in the sense that He came to set members of a family against each other. He was saying that if you're a true disciple, you'll be willing to create a division in your own home.

"... Your commitment goes against the harmony with which you desire to live. Being a Christian and following Jesus Christ may mean you create a division in your own home. But that's the mark of a true disciple. Clinging to Christ often means letting go of family members who reject you because you won't reject the gospel. That's especially true in Jewish families, as well as those in false religions."

pp. 141-142:

"Some people in this world refuse to be satisfied. No doubt you've run into them at work, in your neighborhood, and even at church. ...

"Fault-finders have an easy target in Christianity. It's too exclusive, too unyielding, with too many hypocrites, too dependent on faith over experience. It requires too much sacrifice. It is simply too hard to believe."

"... One of the greatest examples in history begins with the rejection of John the Baptist when he proclaimed to Israel that the Messiah had arrived. His appearance, lifestyle, and teaching methods put off his listeners. But then, when Jesus Himself began His ministry using a contrasting and completely different approach, the same people rejected Him too.

They refused to be satisfied with the message, no matter what the style of the messenger.”

p. 142:

“John’s personal character marked his greatness. He was a man who could recognize, acknowledge, and overcome his limitations, which is always a hallmark of greatness. Every person is either a victim of his situation or a victor over it. Everybody has challenges, weaknesses, failings, infirmities, and problems. The question is whether or not you can overcome them. The great ones fight through, and John did that.”

p. 159-160:

“Not long ago, a friend of mine shared the heartbreaking story of a son who grew up in a church, hearing of the Word of God, who nevertheless turned his back on Christ and entered fully into the homosexual community in San Francisco. I know of far too many tragic cases where men have turned their backs on their wives, their families, and their Lord and walked away. These people didn’t start out as skeptics outside the church, but as people whom the Word of Christ has nurtured. Yet they ultimately rejected the truth of the gospel.

“You’ve probably had a similar experience with someone you know. I’ve already recounted the stories of three of my closest friends—one in high school, one in college, and one in seminary—who seemed so dedicated to serving the Lord, and yet all of them eventually turned their backs on Him. One became a dope-smoking rock-concert promoter, and another became a Buddhist. These were not casual acquaintances, but friends at a very close level. I was sure they shared my passion for the true gospel as much as they shared my love for sports.

“These three young men proved to me that you can profess Christ and not know Him. You can think you’re a Christian and later clearly see that you’re not; you can certainly deceive other people. Seeing these seemingly intelligent, dedicated, strong Christians abandon their beliefs forced me to think about who is really a Christian and what being a Christian really means. Their actions portrayed them as fellow soldiers of Christ, but in the end their hearts exposed them as traitors.”

p. 162: “This is one of the most serious problems with seeker-sensitive churches. I was talking to a pastor at a seeker-friendly church not long ago about his idea that prospective Christians needed to ‘feel welcome’ and ‘accepted’ before anything else: no ‘threats,’ no ‘judgmental baggage.’

“I asked, ‘If you had a person living in sin come to your church, would you confront him?’

“He furrowed his brow and shook his head disapprovingly. ‘Oh, no! We’d want him to feel loved and welcome.’

“My eyes widened. ‘How long would it be before you would actually say something about that?’

“ ‘Maybe a year and half, two years,’ he said, smiling. ‘Because then he would really feel a part of things.’ ”

“That was shocking to me. Is there some virtue in leaving a man in his sin for the sake of feeling accepted? ‘Well, that’s the difference between your church and our church,’ I said finally. ‘Openly practicing sinners come to our church, and they either get saved or they don’t come back.’ ”

pp. 196-197:

Romans 1:18-23 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

“What is known about God is evident through reason. Reason looks at creation (v. 20) and says, ‘There must be a Creator.’ Reason looks at the diversity and says, ‘He must have an immense mind.’ It looks at the design and says, ‘He’s a God of order.’ It looks at the beauty and says, ‘He’s a God of beauty and harmony.’ It looks at vast variety and says, ‘He’s a God of incredible power and complexity.’

“Yes, that’s all true. So true, in fact, that God’s eternal power and divine nature are visible through reason looking at creation. You simply can’t look at the results of creation and doubt there’s a Creator. You’d have to commit intellectual suicide to deny there is a cause for the effect of the universe, that there is a supreme Maker.”

“Man is so wicked, vile, and ungodly that his depravity negates the possibility of his coming all the way to God on his own natural powers. Instead, he suppresses the truth. He dishonors the Creator even though the knowledge of God as Creator is obvious around [him].”

“Verse 21 says the people would not glorify or honor God. Man turns away from God, suppressing the truth and replacing it with empty speculation. That’s how supposedly

smart people come up with stupid lies like evolution. They invent human ideas that are not reality, and their foolish hearts go dark.

“They end up with nothing but garbled understanding in their egotism, as Romans 1:22 states, which is a major part of depravity. They profess to be wise, give themselves Ph.D.s, put on royal and religious robes and cone hats, and march around as if they’re some great religious wise men. They are fools. They are morons.”