

HARD  
SAYINGS

UNDERSTANDING

DIFFICULT PASSAGES

OF SCRIPTURE

R.C. SPROUL

## Hard Sayings



# Hard Sayings

*Understanding Difficult Passages of Scripture*

R.C. SPROUL



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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# Introduction

The concept of *hard sayings* in Scripture is often talked about. But what does it mean? What makes a saying hard? It turns out that there are different ways that a saying can appear hard to us. In fact, the hard sayings of Scripture can be broken into three different categories.

In the first place, a saying of Scripture may be a hard saying if it appears to us to be somewhat harsh in its orientation. In that sense, it's hard to swallow because these statements can jar or jolt us and harm our sensibilities, and we recoil from them. We read, for example, in the Old Testament that God instructed the Israelites to institute the *herem*, which had to do with the wholesale destruction of the Canaanite nation—man, woman, and child—and that seems so harsh and severe. It seems to cast a shadow on the love of God, on the mercy of God, and on the goodness of God. We say “How do we handle texts like that? They're difficult, they're hard” because they are severe to our senses. That's one category of hard saying.

The second category of hard sayings is one that's hard to understand. That is, our interpretation of its meaning is somewhat enigmatic and problematic. Such sayings are hard to understand, not because of their harshness but because they are difficult for us to unravel. For example, much of what the Bible teaches is about the sovereignty of God and His sovereign control over human behavior, coupled with the responsibility that we have as volitional agents and being responsible for the choices that we make. How do we put those things together? That's difficult, and so we can call those sayings *hard sayings*.

The third category, similar to the second, is a hard saying that has become controversial in the history of biblical interpretation, usually because of one of the first two reasons.



## HARD SAYINGS

In this book, we will explore some of the more prominent hard sayings of Scripture. But let me say one thing by way of preface, as a way of commending to you the study of hard sayings. If there is a shortcut to accelerating your understanding of Scripture, it is to focus your attention on such passages. When you read through the Bible and you come upon a text that bothers you, you don't have to be paralyzed and stop there and stay there forever. Move on, but mark it; if you find a passage you don't understand, put a red mark next to it, and then later on, come back and focus on those red marks. Say: "Here's a portion of Scripture that I don't understand. I'm going to devote special attention to trying to understand these passages that are difficult." That is a great way to learn. If you focus on the obstacles to your progress and remove them one by one, you'll have an augmented understanding.

Even more important are those texts that jar your emotions, and when you read them you say, "I don't like what the Bible says here." Put a big mark next to those passages in Scripture that offend you, that at first glance you disagree with. Those are the ones that you need to put your focus on if you want to grow rapidly. If you do so, one of two things will happen. You may discover that the reason that that text offended you or annoyed your sensitivities was that you didn't understand it. After you delve into it and examine it, read resources about it, and come to a better insight of what it means, your problem may be resolved, you can move on, and in the meantime, you've gained new insight and new understanding.

But suppose that you check all the resources, you're careful in your examination of the text, you find out that you understand it exactly right, and it still makes you mad and you don't like it. For example, you may read, "Wives, submit to your husbands" (Col. 3:18). "I don't like that," you say. Put three checks next to that passage because your reaction means one of two things. Either there's something wrong with the author of Scripture who wrote those words—in this case, there would be something wrong with Paul's thinking and Paul ought to change—or there's something wrong with your thinking because here, while you're being critical of Scripture, Scripture is being critical of you.

If you want to grow in grace and in sanctification, find those places where you are critical of God. It might just be that these are the places where you need to change your thinking and your life.

# Without Form and Void

## *Genesis 1*

As we consider the hard sayings of the Bible, we're going to begin with the Old Testament. In fact, we're going to start on page 1 with the very first chapter of Genesis and look at a controversial text that appears as early as the second verse of sacred Scripture.

Let's look, then, at Genesis 1:2. To set it in context, we need to read verse 1 before we read verse 2. Genesis begins with these words: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." That is verse 1. The hard saying, or the controversial verse, follows immediately in verse 2: "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep." Now, that's just the first part of verse 2. Here is the rest of the verse: "And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." It is this first segment of Genesis 1:2 that is our hard saying; it's hard because of the controversy that attends the interpretation of it.

Actually, two different controversies have been attached to the understanding of Genesis 1:2. The first has to do with the third word of the verse. In the English Standard Version, it reads, "The earth was without form." In the early *Scofield Reference Bible*, however, the notation there indicates that the verse should be translated this way: "And the earth *became* without form and void." You can immediately see the difference in meaning between those

variant interpretations. It's one thing to say that the earth *was* without form and void and quite another to say that the earth *became* without form and void, because the presumption is that if it became without form and void, there must have been something else before it in order for it to become something.

Around this interpretation, the old *Scofield Reference Bible* constructed a theory of biblical interpretation that conditioned the whole scope of understanding the entire book of Genesis. That theory is known by one of two names. The common view is what is called the *gap theory*; the more technical term for it is the *restoration hypothesis*. The restoration hypothesis is just that—it's a hypothesis. It's a speculative attempt to explain some significant problems in reconciling the biblical account of creation with certain modern theories of the emergence of the universe out of primordial materials. It's called the gap theory because it suggests that only one verse in the book of Genesis refers to God's initial work of creation, and that is verse 1. Now, of course, the book of Genesis does not have a title in the original manuscript. It's not called Genesis; that's the title that has been added throughout history by the Jews and then subsequently by the Christians in establishing the names of the books of the canon. We are accustomed to thinking that the book of Genesis is called by that name because the book is concerned with teaching something about the beginning of the universe—the genesis of the universe in which we live. If we were to follow the gap theory, we would say that only one verse in the book of Genesis refers to the original work of divine creation—namely, Genesis 1:1. Then what follows, beginning in verse 2, is an account not of the original creation of the universe but of the re-creation or regeneration of a creation that had fallen into a state of chaos. So then, it would perhaps be better to title the book of Genesis the book of Re-Genesis. The idea is that there is a historical gap between verse 1 and verse 2. The gap, which could be as long as several million years or even billions of years, would mean that what we read about the six days of original creation refers instead to the six days of re-creation rather than the original work of God.

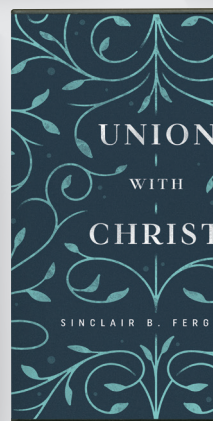
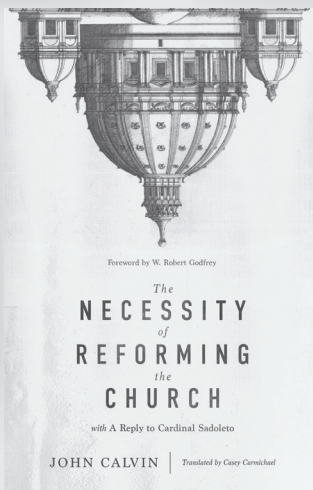
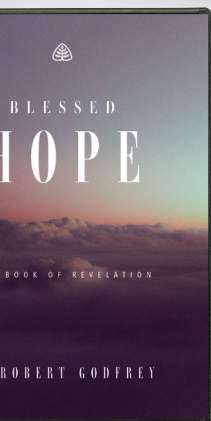
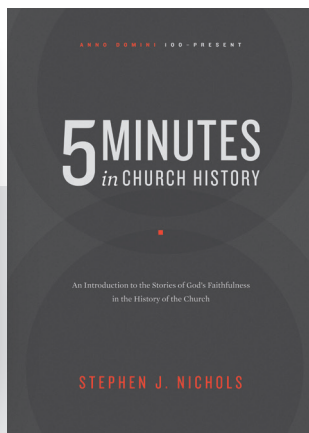
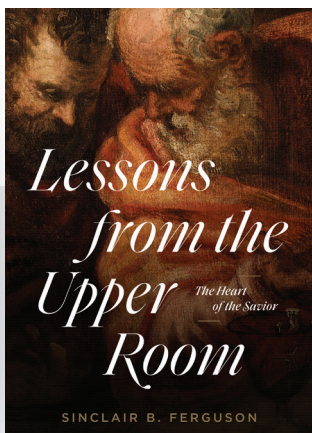
Before I look at this further in terms of interpretation, let me say a word about why such a hypothesis emerged in the first place. One of the big reasons that people struggle with the trustworthiness of sacred Scripture has to do with the onslaught of the reliability of the biblical description of creation in light of modern scientific theories, particularly with respect to the age of the

earth. There is an ongoing debate today, even within the Christian community, with respect to the antiquity of the earth. Is the earth of recent origin, say six thousand years or so ago, or is the creation of the universe something that, as most modern astronomers and scientists claim, took place fifteen to eighteen billion years ago? That's quite a huge discrepancy, and Christians are engaged in debates often over the age of the earth. Even the evangelical world is divided between old-earthers and young-earthers.

The gap theory conveniently solves the dilemma of the age of the earth by saying that the Bible gives only one verse to the original creation, which could have happened thousands, millions, or billions of years ago, and that what is being described in the rest of Genesis 1 is of much more recent origin—namely, the restoration of a creation that had undergone a cataclysmic, catastrophic fall between verse 1 and verse 2. Allusions in some of the poetic literature later on in the Prophets and in Job refer to the cosmic upheaval in heaven with the fall of Satan. In Genesis 1:1 you have the original creation where everything was good, followed by a gap when this cosmic catastrophe happens with the fall of the angels with Satan, the plunging of the universe into ruin, and finally God's repairing the damage beginning in verse 2. If this is the case, we read about the repairing of that damage in the rest of the opening chapters of Genesis.

From a literary perspective, the whole thing virtually hinges on the interpretation of the verb here in Hebrew. In almost every translation of the Bible, the verb is translated as the English word "was," but according to the gap theory or the restitution hypothesis, it should be translated as "became." The word "was" would indicate the state in which it was in the initial aspect of creation, and as I mentioned earlier, the word "became" would suggest a dramatic change of some sort. The verb used here occurs hundreds of times in the Bible, and in any Hebrew lexicon, the primary meaning of the word is "was." Now, it is true that in less than 1 percent of its occurrences in Hebrew, it can be and is sometimes—though rarely—translated as the English word "became." So the translator does have the option when he comes to a text that uses this word to render it as "was" or as "became." When that happens, the normal method of biblical translation is to use the primary, usual meaning of the term unless there is compelling reason to use the other meaning. Such a compelling reason is usually discovered in the immediate context of the text or in the broader context of biblical usage.

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