

# The Most Difficult Verse in the Bible?

by Lynn Andrew

Jesus is speaking. Mark 9:49 (KJV):

**For every one shall be salted with fire,  
and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.**

Commentators commonly admit they have no satisfactory interpretation for this, and translators have puzzled over whether to omit one or the other of the couplet's halves.

Albert Barne's Notes on the New Testament: "Perhaps no passage in the New Testament has given more perplexity to commentators than this, and it may be impossible now to fix its precise meaning."

Adam Clark's Commentary: "... there is great difficulty in this verse."

Jamieson-Fausset-Brown Commentary: "A difficult verse, on which much has been written—some of it to little purpose."

Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers: "The verse presents considerable difficulties, both as regards the reading and the interpretation."

I start with the premise that Mark wrote this and that he and the Holy Spirit did not consider it too difficult (or they would have added an explanation). Then I ask what are we missing that First-Century readers had available to them. With all the scholarship of the centuries at our disposal, the answer has to be, nothing!

So what is the difference between our powers of understanding and theirs? John Mark was an insider, a close associate of Jesus' disciples, but he wrote for posterity and for those who knew little or nothing of Jesus Christ. Why didn't he explain what Jesus meant?

The difference, I believe, is that we have too much: we have the entire New Testament, which we esteem the most significant part of the Bible. Mark's Bible and the Scriptures Jesus used were essentially our Old Testament. So let us set aside, as well as we can, later Christian development and look at Mark's writing in light of the Old Testament.

After all, this should be standard procedure: the first rule of Bible study is "Consider the context!"

The first word in our most-difficult verse is "For," which tells us it connects to the foregoing passage. Go back at least as far as 9:43. Oops ... more difficulty—some of that passage is even shocking. I'm taken aback by "... where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." It seems out of character for Jesus to be saying this.

Some translations soften it, but it appears thrice in the KJV. Apparently Mark was not shocked. He has Jesus repeating this phrase as if it were a refrain that people quoted all the time. If we assume that's the case, we then go looking for the source and find it at the very end of Isaiah—in fact the last verse—where the LORD God is speaking. Isaiah 66:24 (KJV):

**And they shall go forth and look upon the carcasses  
of the men that have transgressed against me;  
for their worm shall not die,  
neither shall their fire be quenched,  
and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.**

This must be what Mark assumed we would know and what Jesus was quoting. If his Father said it, we must allow Jesus to say it too. But it still seems odd, and we wonder why it appealed to ancient Jews. Or maybe it didn't appeal to them at all, and that's why it was said.

We need to get the story behind it.

Note the immediate context in Isaiah: "They shall look upon the carcasses of the men who have rebelled against me ... and they [those dead bodies] shall be abhorrent to all [living] flesh." What seemed a morbid jingle turns out to be a reference to a marker of victory: some visual display that will serve a purpose in that day.

What day is that? And what purpose could it serve?

Isaiah chapter 66 is not difficult to understand once you have the correct orientation. You can get it from chapter 1. Chapters 1 and 66 are like front and back covers that represent what goes on between them. You might have to set aside what you have been taught about Jerusalem in the prophetic future and instead take Isaiah at his word: Jerusalem means literally the city in Judea where it stood during Isaiah's lifetime and where it stands again in Israel today. After the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, a new Jerusalem on that spot will be the seat of the government which will rest upon his shoulders. If this is unacceptable exegesis, as it is to many in Christendom, you will have to live with the enigmas of Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:42-50.

Laying aside our prejudice, we easily get the meaning of Isaiah 66:24 from the context. Verses 18-23 will suffice. We get the picture of people coming to Jerusalem to behold the glory of the King. So during this pilgrimage they visit something that takes all the glory out of disobedience. Those who opposed the Kingdom of God are memorialized in terms of their condemnation: a museum-like display of ruined bodies signifying souls in torment. Their physical bodies may have been consumed by fire (or for those who missed the fire, by "worms").

Two interpretations are possible: 1) emphasizing the "abhorring," it persuades humans who dwell on earth during the Millennial reign of Christ that if they decide to oppose the King, they risk paying a

dreadful penalty; and 2) emphasizing the “transgressed,” it sustains hope in any age for national revenge (66:6), since they considered the enemies of Israel the enemies of God.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” disqualifies the second interpretation. Still, it could well be the popular interpretation of those in Jesus’ audience. Israel had suffered much at the hands of their enemies and currently were under the iron fist of Rome. They were looking forward to the Christ who would fulfill “the day of the LORD’s vengeance, the year of recompenses for the controversy of Zion” (Isaiah 34:8). They might imagine themselves crossing a glowing pit of fire and brimstone on a marble walkway, virtually trampling their enemies under foot like worthless salt.

The context in Mark has an additional verse. Here are 49 and 50:

**For every one shall be salted with fire,  
and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt.**

**Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his saltiness,  
wherewith will ye season it?**

**Have salt in yourselves,  
and have peace one with another.**

The “For” signals that “fire” makes reference to the hell fire in the preceding verses.<sup>1</sup> “Fire” connects to “sacrifice,” and “sacrifice” connects to “salt,” and the salting of this salt is for good seasoning (not a preserving), and there is a danger of its losing its benefit, and it represents a personal maturity that makes for relationships of peace. Also notice that the passage is in three couplets, so we expect that the halves work together to shape a thought by addition and by contrast.

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1. Some expositors deny this, but our premise is that what we have in front of us is a reliable translation of what Mark wrote and what he intended (and by implication what the Holy Spirit did not intend to be unreasonably obscure).

The ritual blood sacrifice represents that sin must be paid for and allows the sinner a substitute. But salt is a requirement: it makes the sacrifice acceptable (see Ezekiel 43:24, which happens to be in the context of the future Jerusalem). The second half of 9:49 confirms that salting with fire refers to the salt in the sacrifice that pardons sin. But the first half has reversed the sequence. Together they state that: a) salt is necessary for salvation by the fire; and b) the sort of salt needed is the result of the fire. This endless loop of mutual dependence is broken if a Lamb salted and sacrificed by God suffers the penalty of another's sin yet *lives* to become their Priest.

Next we have it that salt is good—if it is genuine. So we may infer that without this salt from God, the fire of sacrifice may ultimately be the fire of damnation, for whatever salt was tried was worthless.

Here is an application: The ungodly may sacrifice much as they work for the peaceful world they envision. But since they lack the blessing of Christ, he will war against them and destroy their works.

But before making personal applications in Mark 9:43-48, remember that the passage is absolutely tied to the future. The context is much different from that in Matthew 5:29-30. Reclaiming the world from the devil involves a cutting off of evil on a different level.

After establishing his Kingdom, a rod of iron will enforce laws and curb unholy impulses. Enemies will be fewer but not absent, for a war will break out as soon as Satan is unleashed. Thus it seems reasonable if pilgrims coming to Jerusalem are required to view this reminder that being on the wrong side of a sacrifice is never a good thing.<sup>2</sup>

The "most difficult verse" is part of a lesson about sanctification. The disciples, while looking forward to reigning with Jesus when he

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2. See the Lynn Andrew essay, "The Sacrifice."

comes into the glory of his Father with the holy angels, must have wondered about the transitional wars as indicated in Isaiah 66:15-16 and elsewhere. Yes, rebels will be separated from the Kingdom, but he must sanctify his disciples too by sacrifice. (Naturally this context is ignored by commentators who are not expecting him to literally rule the world. No one likes to think about the unprecedented tribulation and trial by fire that awaits at least certain portions of the earth.)

A paraphrase of Mark 9:49-50 could go like this:

**You disciples will sacrifice your lives too.**

Acceptable sacrifices are salted, you know.

Salt is good if it develops from holy sacrifice,  
but if derived from other sources it is useless.

Prepare for that day by being seasoned with salt,  
and you will have your place in my reign of peace.

His disciples learn that they too will endure fire; but since they are his friends, their sacrifice is acceptable, making them perfect.

We have glossed over the cutting off of the hand and foot and plucking out of the eye. Those metaphors illustrate the principle that separation from evil is sometimes necessary to avoid complete ruin. This is in stark contrast to what went immediately before it: "Whoever gives you a cup of water in my name, because you belong to Christ, will not lose his reward." He is speaking of rewarding friends on the one hand and cutting off enemies on the other.

This thread of continuity starts in 8:27, where Jesus begins orienting his disciples to the future. Peter declares, "You are the Christ," and his answer is soon confirmed on the mountain. But did Peter really know his master? By the revelation in Colossians chapter 1, we know that Peter was speaking to "the image of the invisible God by whom all

things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible— thrones, dominions, principalities, powers—all things were created by him and for him.” In the light of this, Jesus has authority to put “the men who have rebelled against me” to ignoble use in spite of critics.

He also has the right to cut off rebel nations. Does he delight in any of this? “The LORD will come with fire and with his chariots like a whirlwind to render his anger with fury and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh, and the slain of the LORD shall be many” (Isaiah 66:16). Yet those whom he must slay are part of his beloved world. Those nations are like his hands and feet: they must be cut off to avoid the whole world being condemned. In Mark 9:43-48 he shares by means of this painfully personal metaphor how he feels about judging nations: the one who is offended is the one who must dismember himself.

The persistent subject in Mark 8:27 through 9:50 is the coming Kingdom. What must be heavy on his mind is that things come out well for the world in which he has so much invested. Can you imagine governing the nations with carnal men like Simon Peter for princes? Those disciples were disputing among themselves about who would be greatest! He will not cut them off, but all Israel must be salted by fire before that nation will understand the Lamb they sacrificed.

Chapter 9 begins with what must be understood in the context and not minimized by making it pertain only to the transfiguration:

**Verily I say unto you,  
That there be some of them that stand here  
which shall not taste of death till they have seen  
the kingdom of God come with power.**

Jesus meant exactly what he said.

In order to appreciate his point of view, we must remind ourselves that his incarnation is the event that forebodes the end of Satan's dominion—not as beginning a new chapter in the same book, but rather putting the old book on the shelf and opening a new one (a simile of history, not Scripture). The new book starts exactly where the old one left off. The difference is the King has come as prophet to his people—who habitually kill their prophets. From heaven's perspective his birth secured the Kingdom: the program had begun. (The rocks will cry out if Christmas be forgotten.) Being master of death, he rises to deploy the Spirit and becomes High Priest for the church. The length of time until Satan is bound is not the important thing. Certain preparations are necessary. His followers must loose on earth those appointed to heaven. (The corrosion of Rome's iron owes something to their salt.)

Still, I think we would like to ask him, if we could, exactly what he meant by "salt." We understand that it is connected with sacrifice, but could he give us an example? Does the sacrifice have to be by fire? Could reading the Bible every day and attending church suffice?

Jesus repeatedly warned against disobedience and not desiring him. Even inattentiveness or carelessness testifies to the same thing. Luke 14:33-35 records a few of his words touching this:

So likewise, whosoever he be of you that  
forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple.

Salt is good: but if the salt have lost his savor,  
wherewith shall it be seasoned?

It is neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill;  
but men cast it out.

He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

How times change.

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