

In search of...



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Hypothetically Speaking

Perhaps you have been in the following situation. You are sitting down with a non-Christian friend and an open Bible. You explain the need to be obedient to the gospel and what this involves. You talk about the need for belief and repentance; so far, no argument. You talk about the need for self-denial and cross-bearing (Matthew 16:24); again, this makes sense, in light of what God offers in return.

Then you come to baptism, and suddenly your friend frowns and slowly shakes his head. He sits back

and thinks for a moment, and then says, "I have a problem with that. Suppose a man is crawling across the desert and comes across a Bible. He reads what he is supposed to do to be saved, but there is no water anywhere. Even though he does everything else required, he cannot be baptized—and before he can go further, he dies from exposure. So you're saying that his soul is lost just because he wasn't dunked in water, right?"

And there you sit, staring blankly, wondering how to answer. If you say, "He is lost," then you

portray God to be a heartless legalist who won't save someone based on a technicality. If you say, "He is saved," then you undermine all the New Testament passages that speak of the need for baptism. It seems your friend has you over a barrel. You begin to perspire and stare at your Bible, stalling for time. Finally you say, "I don't know." And your friend looks at you, smiles, and says, "Well, if you can't be sure of that man's situation, how can you be so confident of mine?" You feel like you just got gut-punched in the stomach. Your friend, who presented not a single Bible passage in his defense, completely undermined every argument for baptism with a simple, imaginary story. Or did he?

What this friend of yours did was toss you a seemingly unanswerable hypothetical situation. He took a small element of your own argument and magnified it to the point of where it becomes the real argument instead. (In critical-thinking circles, this is called a "straw man" argument.) Then he re-packages this small part in a self-constructed story that guarantees that you will not be able to answer it without incriminating either yourself or the Word of God. He knows that the burden of proof is on you to prove him wrong, even though he himself has not proved anything.

Without presuming his motives, there remains a glaring

problem with your friend's logic: he created this "scenario" out of thin air. You are suddenly made to argue against a situation that never existed. His fabricated story, however, is a far cry from posing a solid argument supported by relevant evidence and sound reasoning.

"Hypothetical" means literally "a supposed proposition." It is a situation that implies insufficient evidence to provide anything more than an assumed explanation, since it operates on a faulty or presumptive premise. One who appeals to a hypothetical scenario conveniently has to prove nothing. In responding to this, here are some things to keep in mind:

Just because someone creates an artificial scenario that you cannot prove is wrong does not make that person automatically right. Neither theology nor salvation is legitimized by pretend stories, subterfuge, or negative arguments. God's Word says what it says and means what it means; a person can avoid its instructions, but he cannot nullify them.

Just because you do not know the answer to a question does not mean an answer does not exist. Lack of knowledge or evidence may prevent you from learning a definite answer, but not God (Hebrews 4:12-13).

Just because you cannot answer conclusively how God would handle the "man in the

desert" hypothesis does not invalidate everything He has said on the requirement of baptism. It just means that you are not God, and that you need to defer the matter to Him.

Some might argue, "But Jesus used hypothetical situations — they're called parables." Yet a parable does not pretend to be anything more than what it is — an earthly illustration designed to convey some heavenly lesson. It is used to reinforce the truth, not refute it. Parables may be hypothetical in nature (Matthew 25:1-12), but Jesus never used unanswerable scenarios in order to positively "prove" His message. The gospel does not rest upon "cleverly-devised tales" (II Peter 1:16); neither does the gospel defeat its opposition with hypothetical arguments. The burden of proof is in fact upon the person who resists the gospel: first, he must prove the gospel to be false; second, he must provide something superior to it. He cannot simply create a vacuum without filling it.

The gospel teaches the revealed Word of God. The New Testament was written and preserved in order to convince us of this truth (John 20:31). God has proved the gospel with irrefutable signs and unassailable arguments (John 5:36, Acts 2:22, Hebrews 2:4). The reality is: the gospel is not on trial. What is on trial is each person's sincerity in responding to it. If a man is sincere, he ultimately will listen to God. If he is not sincere, then he will reject the truth

"without a cause" (John 15:25).

Paul wrote, "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (II Corinthians 10:5) — including man-made, unproved, hypothetical scenarios. We do not need sophistry to teach others the gospel. All we need to do is speak the truth in love (cf. Ephesians 4:15), and not become prisoners of someone else's doubt (I Corinthians 7:23).

You do not need to be sucked into the black hole of someone else's artificially-constructed logic. Here's how you could answer the "man in the desert" hypothesis, for example: "Friend, you have posed an intriguing hypothetical situation. If ever such a scenario did actually exist, God will decide that man's case with mercy and fairness. But this fails to address the relevant matter at hand: first, what God requires of you personally; second, your ability to respond rightly to what He has said. People are not lost just because they have not been dunked in water; they are lost because they refuse to obey God when given opportunity to do so. Given this, what is your response to God's offer for your salvation?"

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Psalm Sixty

J Y K M Z C D C I H O O S A N C Z Q C R
W H O M I Q T U H N L Y H Y F R Q P Z D
G T S P O K E N U X A W I B O I A K E Y
O A O C D C A U D D V H S L G Y U X C D
N P Y G H F O T X L C G A M L L Z T K W
A P P F Y E Z G B D E F E N S E S A G X
L K O K L D V L Q A H W C V Y Q W B X B
P P V G M Q Z U S Z N H Z I Z Y O E R J
P R A R N A G F I A K B T P K W W V C H
X N N E G V W L I H H L H Z R Q U A K E
O F S J W S P S U A M V P J C C K L Z O
T R W E N C K H J E P V V Q M H G I U G
W E E C M E H I H Y E Z H Q Q T N A J B
E G R T E P K X A U O F M I Z D I N E V
G D N E D T R I U M P H O H T S B T E A
V F X D I E H L P I L P X W I L O L M I
C B A F O R T I F I E D F D U M L Y H N
P Z Y Y B A N N E R Z D W Y R F H F W M
Z E E W Y F V U S O F A A Z O K S Q E K
C A K O L C X A M C K G I H P Y O Q B X
X O I W A P A W Y Y S V T P D Y E O T Y

- ✓ "you have rejected us, broken our defenses" (vs. 1)
-God had made the land to quake (vs. 2)
-He had made His people see hard things (vs. 3)
-He had set up a banner for those who feared Him (vs. 4)
-"give salvation by your right hand and answer us" (vs. 5)
-"God has spoken in His holiness..." (vs. 6)
-"Judah is my scepter" (vs. 7)
-"over Philistia I shout in triumph" (vs. 8)
-"Who will bring me to the fortified city?" (vs. 9)
-"Have you not rejected us, O God?" (vs. 10)
-"for vain is the salvation of man!" (vs. 11)
-With God we shall do valiantly (vs. 12)