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December 16, 2016

Does the Bible Really Say That? – What Do You Think?

The following are concepts from an interview with a Baptist Minister named Mark Woods regarding his recent book titled: *Does the Bible Really Say That...?: Challenging Our Assumptions in the Light of the Scripture* (Monarch Books, 2016). Let's spend this morning discussing the pros and cons of each statement. A copy of the article posted on The Bible Gateway is attached.

1. God may not have a plan for people's lives.
2. God does not heal everyone and he doesn't want to.
3. Evangelism is not about saving people from hell.
4. Why is forgiveness harder than people think?
5. In what way is prayer about God and not about us?



December 2, 2016

Does the Bible Really Say That...?: An Interview with Mark Woods

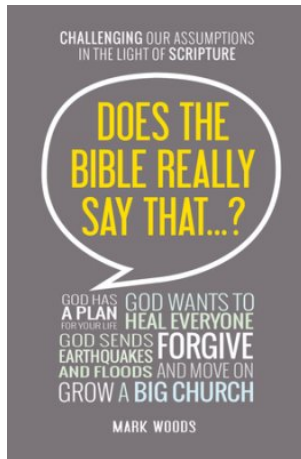
Jonathan Petersen

Manager of marketing for Bible Gateway.

Are we missing some of the richness and depth of our faith because we don't like to ask the questions we ought to ask? Are there different ways of thinking about old truths that

might challenge and inspire us? Are there, even, old truths that turn out not to be true after all?

Bible Gateway interviewed [Mark Woods \(@RevMarkWoods\)](#) about his book, ***Does the Bible Really Say That...?: Challenging Our Assumptions in the Light of the Scripture*** (Monarch Books, 2016).



What problem are you trying to clear up with this book?

Mark Woods: The genesis of the book was when I wrote a piece for *Christian Today* titled something like, “God does not have a plan for your life and that’s OK.” It registered many times the number of hits we’d normally expect for such a column, and it obviously touched a nerve. I’m from an evangelical background, and I started to think about the things we just assume because we’re evangelicals—they’re part of the culture rather than being truly biblical.

You begin the book by saying God may not have a plan for people’s lives. What do you mean?

Mark Woods: That first column was the launching-pad for the first chapter of the book. My argument is that the verses in the Bible people sometimes take as saying that—like [Jeremiah 29:11](#), which says “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’”—don’t really refer to God having a personal road-map for each of us at all. They refer to particular points in history where God intervened. I absolutely accept that he did, and that there’s a divine purpose behind Israel’s story. But that’s a very long way from saying that he plans our own lives.

Apart from the weakness of the biblical arguments, there are real problems with how that works out in practice. Does God plan illness, or divorce, or large-scale tragedies? I don’t think many people would say these are God’s plan. So we end up having to do a lot of mental gymnastics to hold on to the idea. I think we’d be better ditching it and

talking about his desire for our future, instead. I'm sure he's involved in our lives; it's just that he doesn't have them mapped out for us. For many people that's very challenging.

Why do you say God doesn't heal everyone and he doesn't want to?

Mark Woods: Well, most of the people in Israel when Jesus walked the earth weren't healed, though he did heal everyone who came to him. In [Matthew 9:20-22](#) he heals a woman who simply touches his cloak. And while I believe in divine healing today, I think it's much rarer than many people would want to think. There's often a lack of hard evidence for it. So I've explored what that means.

What does it mean to us that there are people in our churches who are sick in mind or body? Are they just failures, who perhaps haven't had enough faith to be healed? It seems to me that we can do better than that. I've been very clear that there's nothing inherently good about suffering. We should end it wherever we can. But it can be a great teacher, as well, and we need to be willing to learn from it. Oscar Romero, the martyred Salvadoran archbishop, once said: "There are things that can only be seen by eyes that have cried." I think that's true.

Explain what you mean that evangelism is not about saving people from hell.

Mark Woods: There's quite a debate going on in evangelical circles at the moment about hell. Does it mean eternal conscious torment for everyone who isn't a Christian? That's the traditional view, but it's being challenged by people who argue that passages like the story of Dives and Lazarus ([Luke 16:19-31](#)) have been misunderstood, and that places where Jesus appears to talk about hell, like [Matthew 23:33](#), can be read in different ways.

I actually think the biblical evidence for the traditional view of hell is much weaker than we sometimes think, but that's not really the thrust of that chapter. I think there are better reasons for doing evangelism, and more effective ones. Jesus is true, Christianity is good for us and good for the world—that kind of thing.

Why is forgiveness harder than people think?

Mark Woods: Because we often think it's an end point that solves all our problems, whereas it's really a step on the way. Jesus taught his disciples to forgive in what we call the Lord's Prayer ([Matthew 6:14-15](#)), and he told Peter he should forgive "seventy times seven" someone who had injured him ([Matthew 18:22](#)). But forgiveness just means refusing to take revenge, setting aside an injury. It's something we may have to do again and again as the anger and pain of an injury resurfaces—that "seventy times seven" might mean repeated acts of forgiveness for the same injury. And forgiveness can be misapplied—sometimes from the best motives—by pastors who want their congregations to get on with each other. It can mean abusers getting away with it. It can never be enforced, only offered.

In what way is prayer about God and not about us?

Mark Woods: I worry that we have a wrong idea of prayer, in the sense that we can imagine it's about persuading God to do something. I think prayer meetings are great, and a crowded prayer meeting with passionate believers generates a huge spiritual energy. I'm not knocking that. But we need to be careful. God will do what God will do, and he isn't impressed by the numbers we attract or the noise we make. In [1 Kings 19](#) there's the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal. There were 450 of them and only one of him; all the noise and the drama was on Baal's side, and we know what happened. The simple prayer of one man was heard.

How do you want people to change after reading your book?

Mark Woods: I'd like them to know it's OK to ask questions and come to conclusions that are a bit different from what they might've thought. But it's not a book to knock down ideas for the sake of it. I've really tried to be positive and build people up.

What are your thoughts about Bible Gateway and the Bible Gateway App?

Mark Woods: I love it! It's my default online Bible site and I use it every day. It's easily the best there is around.

Bio: Mark Woods is a UK-based Baptist minister who moved into religious journalism after 16 years in pastoral ministry. He served as editor of *The Baptist Times* and then as consulting editor of *The Methodist Recorder*, and is now a contributing editor for the online magazine *Christian Today*. He's in leadership in his home church and in his spare time enjoys films and the outdoors.