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**John 18:31–33, New Revised Standard Version.**

*The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”<sup>32</sup> (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)*

*<sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”*

**Preserving the Word of God in the Garbage.**

For long periods of history, the authenticity of the New Testament was never questioned, at least not by most people. Only in recent times has skepticism about the veracity of Gospels, Acts, Paul’s letters, and other documents in the New Testament gotten to be so widespread and so deep. People even question the existence of Jesus. Many young people in the United States today have been raised believing that Jesus is a myth. Secularism is seen as sophisticated, while Christian belief is viewed as dated and based on historically untrue texts. But God made sure that no matter what, strong evidence that is very hard to counter has survived, making it clear that the texts we have in the New Testament were written when they claim to have been written and that they are truly historical.

Once, when I was in high school and visiting my father’s car shop to get some work done on my 1965 Pontiac GTO – gold flake paint with black leather

upholstery – a man who had come there to get tires walked up to me as I was getting out of my car. He was wearing what looked like a dirty green work uniform. He complimented how well I had taken care of my car. He was a bit younger than my father, I think, and we chatted for a few minutes. Then he looked at his watch and said he needed to get into the shop because he had someone coming by to take him back to work. I asked him what he did. He looked away for a moment, and when he looked back, he seemed embarrassed. He said that he worked at a landfill. I almost asked him if that was the same as a garbage dump, but then I realized he was ashamed of where he worked. We clumsily spoke for another minute or so, then he went into the shop. I did talk to him when he was on his way out, after ordering tires, and I'll get back to this.

In case you're wondering, landfills have been in use for a very long time. There was a landfill that was in use for as much as 800 years, starting just after the year 0. It was in a place called Oxyrhynchus, in the middle of Egypt. It is considered one of the most important archeological sites on Earth – because of what was thrown away there. In 1896, two English archeologists arrived there. They had a hunch that an ancient landfill might hold important written material. They had no idea how right they were. They began to find a myriad of Christian documents, including some of the oldest New Testament fragments ever found –

enough to produce 70 volumes when collected. In fact, so many fragments of the Bible were found that that scholars didn't have enough translators. They began a crowdsourcing effort whereby people today can go online and look at photographed images of fragments and translate them. If three to five translations provided by random people agree, the result is accepted. The landfill is the perfect place to find ancient documents, as the area is extremely dry, which preserves papyrus. People would throw away old handwritten copies of various Bible books, like the Gospels and Paul's letters. Also, papyrus was very expensive, so when a scriptural manuscript got old, it would be torn into pieces, and the back would be reused for business receipts, personal notes, and letters. Eventually, it all ended up in the landfill.

By the way, many Old Testament fragments have been found in our Egyptian landfill, but they, like the New Testament fragments, tend to date to about the first century A.D., and so the Old Testament papyrus pieces were created long after the originals. Consider the New Testament fragment below:



This is from that landfill. It contains words from the following passage. This passage begins in the middle of verse 31 of Chapter 18 of the Gospel of John – because this is where the text on the fragment begins:

*The Jews replied, “We are not permitted to put anyone to death.”<sup>32</sup> (This was to fulfill what Jesus had said when he indicated the kind of death he was to die.)*

*<sup>33</sup> Then Pilate entered the headquarters again, summoned Jesus, and asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”*

It’s thought that the Gospel of John, containing this passage, was written sometime late in the first century. This fragment is famous because it is probably the earliest known New Testament manuscript fragment found, copied from around 100 to 150 A.D., approximately within 50 years of the original Gospel being written, perhaps less than a decade. Let me repeat: the oldest piece of New Testament manuscript ever found was found in a garbage dump. It was uncovered some time before 1920 but not properly identified until 1935. If by some chance this John fragment is not the oldest New Testament fragment ever found, the oldest one is certainly another fragment found in this same landfill.

Here is Job 2:8:

*<sup>8</sup> Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.*

“Sitting among the ashes” is taken by scholars to refer to sitting in an ash heap where garbage is been being burned. So, Job, who has lost his children, his

servants, his livestock, all in one day, is reduced to sitting in garbage in desperate grief, and taking a shard of pottery from that garbage to scrape at the sores on his body. In Job, God allows Satan to horribly afflict Job to test his faith, to see that it is genuine. One of the lessons we get from this passage is to dispel a popular belief among people at the time that suffering was always a punishment from God, that someone must have sinned greatly if they are now suffering greatly. Job was the ultimate righteous man. Even his wife encouraged him to lose faith, given what was happening to him, but he refused. So, Job could be a very moral man, someone with full, unwavering trust in God, and yet he could be tossed among the rubbish. Trash or garbage isn't a common or consistent metaphor in the Bible, but it is clear the ancient Jews had a strong revulsion toward rubbish, filth, waste, because these things ran against their notion of maintaining purity and cleanliness. Archeological evidence shows that Jerusalem had a very disciplined, organized process for managing trash and other waste – unlike many surrounding cultures. This is why it was so humiliating, so degrading for Job to find himself sitting in garbage.

This is from the New Testament, Paul's letter to the folks at Philippi:

<sup>7</sup>*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.*

<sup>8</sup>*More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things,*

*and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.*

In this chapter, 3, of Philippians, Paul is arguing that we should find our spiritual security not in rituals or personal accomplishments. All these human-engineered things are just rubbish, garbage, compared to simply having faith in God. Paul was a Jew. To take his accomplishments, which to most of us are extremely impressive, as a Jewish Pharisee and then as a primary founder of the Christian Church, and write them off as “rubbish” is an extremely strong statement for him, especially considering how much Jews distanced themselves from refuse.

Here is a passage from Matthew, Chapter 5:

*<sup>29</sup> If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.*

English translations almost always say “*than for your whole body to be thrown into hell*”, but it really says “*than for your whole body to be thrown into Gehenna*” in the original Greek of the Gospel. “Gehenna” is not literally hell, not even close, and “Hell” is a bizarre translation. Gehenna is a physical place where people at one point dumped garbage. It still exists in present-day Jerusalem. It was also called the Valley of Hinnom, and in the Book of Jeremiah, Israelites who had fallen into pagan practices were said to have built shrines to the pagan god Baal in the Valley of Hinnom and used these shrines to sacrifice their children to Baal. What

our passage from Matthew literally says is that we are better off being blinded in an eye than sinning with that eye and ending up in this garbage dump of a place where people used to sacrifice their children to a pagan God. We see the author of the Gospel of Matthew, perhaps the Apostle Matthew himself, equating horrific sin with a garbage dump, and building his remarks on the belief that this garbage dump was itself equivalent to a place where pagans sacrificed children.

I think we get the picture of what ancient Jews thought of garbage and places where garbage was dumped: it represented shame, deep sin, and the worthlessness of worldly accomplishments and objects, compared to a simple faith in God. Yet this is where God allowed us to find the most ancient fragment of New Testament Scripture, along with a vast store of other scriptural fragments.

We have a level of sanitation, of cleanliness that most people in this world do not enjoy. Interestingly, ancient Egyptians were the same way: like the Israelites, they had a very powerful sense of personal purity. This is what led to the preservation of approximately a half million fragments of ancient papyrus, many of them containing Scripture. These fragments are not useful simply because they are old and therefore intriguing. Before the 20<sup>th</sup> century, before this landfill was discovered and excavated, we had very few New Testament fragments that were at all old, dating for instance to the papyrus era. The

discovery of these pieces of Scripture confirms that the books of the New Testament have been passed down to us unaltered and that they do reflect the true teachings of first-generation Christian leaders, like the Apostles. This is critical. The Gospel and the rest of the New Testament are authentic.

Here is a passage from Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 24:

*<sup>29</sup> "Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken.*

*<sup>30</sup> Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven' with power and great glory. <sup>31</sup> And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.*

*<sup>32</sup> "From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. <sup>33</sup> So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. <sup>34</sup> Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. <sup>35</sup> Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.*

This occurs just before the death of Jesus. Jesus is speaking. He is predicting what will happen at the time of judgement when Jesus returns. There are some who believe that this passage describes true cosmic events that will immediately predate the end of time. Others say that this writing is only symbolic. Either way, notice the final verse: <sup>35</sup> *Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.* Jesus is clearly saying that his Word will survive even end of humanity

on Earth as we know it. Perhaps he knew that the day would come when a modern society would view his Word as mythical – and would need to discover undeniable proof of his historic legitimacy.

This passage from Matthew fits well with finding the most ancient piece of New Testament Scripture in the also ancient landfill in Oxyrhynchus, Egypt. Landfills are meant to contain garbage, not to destroy it, not to see it decay. This is why archeologists cherish ancient landfills all around the world, although few are as extensive and well preserved as that in Oxyrhynchus. If God wants us to retain his original words right up until the end of mankind, a landfill is the best place to put it. Ancient libraries, like the vast Library of Alexandria in Egypt, established in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. died due to neglect, budget cuts, and in part by fire. It was completely gone by the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. But God chose a more reliable storage area for his Word, and not very far away. If you want what you say to never pass away, put it in the human trash. If you want to make sure that no one can ever deny that the writings in the New Testament are legitimate, tuck them away in a landfill and keep them hidden until the twentieth century. If they had been found earlier, they might have been lost or destroyed. But with today's technology, these fragments of papyrus will never go away. They've been

documented, photographed, uploaded to the Internet, read by thousands of people, and verified by scientists extremely thoroughly.

After I first spoke to him, the man who I met at my father's shop went inside and bought tires from one of my dad's guys, then he walked out to the sidewalk to wait for his ride. But on the way, he stopped by the garage and found me. My car was up on a rack. Customers were not allowed back there by California law, and so the shop manager had to ask us to leave. We chatted for a few minutes while he waited for his ride. He told me that he had worked at a landfill for twenty-something years. Most recently, he had driven a bulldozer-like machine, pushing mountains of garbage around. He always came home smelling like garbage. He was embarrassed to tell his neighbors and the people in his church what he did for a living. He had never finished high school. I don't know if working in a landfill is still as stigmatized, but I wish at the time I could have told this man that God left the most ancient of New Testament Scripture copies – ones that could conceivably be copies of the original documents themselves – in a landfill. That is how God preserved his Word. I never saw this man again, but my father said that he wished all his customers were like him.

The authors of the New Testament often wrote in ways in which we do not write today. They freely mixed metaphorical, allegorical, and philosophical

writing devices. I have often spoken about various aspects of the Bible that do not meet today's rigid standards of nonfiction. There are historical writings in the Old Testament that are rooted in traditions that have been passed down orally and at this point should be taken as faith stories, not history. We know that many biblical writers, in both Testaments, were trying to capture the feel of incidents and not literally what happened, blow by blow. In general, the Bible is meant to convey spiritual truths, to tell us about the nature of God and our relationship with God, and not to be read primarily as fully factual biography or history. But we know for a fact that it was not fabricated, faked, or forged. The evidence for this with the New Testament is particularly strong. We must of course interpret the New Testament through the eyes of the age in which it was written. Only minor scribal errors and variations have been introduced since it was written two thousand years ago. The Word of God is real and trustworthy.