

On Penknives and the Bible—No. 1

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The sixth-century BC king of Judah, Jehoiakim, rebelled against the righteousness of his father, Josiah, and consequently against God. Jeremiah prophesied the captivity in Babylon God would soon visit upon His people. As the king listened to God's warnings read to him, he did not like them. He responded by cutting off the pages of the scroll as they were read and casting them into the fire (Jer. 36:20–25).

What Jehoiakim did literally, men have done figuratively—both before and since his time—as they read statements in the Bible with which they disagree. With their theological “penknives,” they remove them and pitch them in the fire. For example:

- **“By works a man is justified, and not only by faith”** (Jam. 2:24). The sixteenth-century reformer, Martin Luther, had so committed himself to the concept that salvation was by faith alone that, upon reading this statement from James, he cast doubt on the inspiration of the entire epistle. Luther based his “faith-only” creed upon the deadly practice that arrays Biblical statements against each other rather than finding the harmony between them—so he took his penknife to God's Word. When Paul and James are correctly understood, they harmonize fully: The “works” apart from which faith saves the sinner are works of the law of Moses and works of our own merit (Rom. 3:20; Eph. 2:8–9). The “works” that save are acts of obedience in response to God's commands to sinners who believe in His Son (Mark 16:16; Jam. 2:17–26). Multiplied millions, Luther-like, are still using their penknives on this teaching of Holy Writ and casting it into the fire.
- **“How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?”** (Heb. 2:3). Another sixteenth-century reformer, John Calvin, concluded (from a series of egregious misinterpretations regarding Divine sovereignty), that once one is saved, he cannot be lost (his “perseverance of the saints” credo). However, the inspired question above demands the answer, “We (Christians) will by no means escape the just Judgment of the Lord.” Calvin did not like this passage (and scores of others that teach the same thing), so, like Jehoiakim, he used his theological penknife on it and its many Biblical parallels. Tragically, Calvin's errors have been enshrined, to one degree or another, in most of the Protestant creed books, leading throngs of others, as he did, to employ their penknives.

The apostle Peter had in mind all such penknife-wielders described above when he wrote of those who “wrest...the scriptures unto their own destruction” (2 Pet. 3:16).

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