

God has Spoken in These Last Days

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There are two ways of learning truth, and only two: reason and revelation. People are forever asking which is more important. That is like asking which blade of a pair of scissors is the more important, or which leg of a pair of trousers is the more important; it takes two. And it is impossible to gather the balanced body of knowledge apart from the use of both reason and revelation. These two are essential to any discovery of truth.

We know it is possible to throw out reason and to attempt to rely on revelation alone. People who do this become guilty of strange actions which we call fanaticism – like trying to find the recipe for apple pie in Scripture, for instance. If we decide that reason has no value at all, then we will find ourselves behaving inappropriately. The other day I read an account of a man in one of the countries of Europe who felt the Bible was the solution to every problem in his life. A number of gophers were eating the vegetables in his garden. He solved his problem, or thought he did, by taking the gospel of John and reading it in the four corners of the garden, hoping thereby to eliminate the gophers. That is an example of throwing out reason. Setting traps would have been much more appropriate than using revelation in this way.

It is also possible to throw out revelation and to rely on reason alone, and there are many who are attempting this. The result is equally disastrous. We have discovered or reasoned how to penetrate the mysteries of the natural realm and have coaxed out of it fantastic amounts of energy undreamed of in previous generations. But we have failed completely to discover how to change man, because we have set aside revelation. Therefore, the increasing power over creation which man exercises is paralleled by an increasingly cruel and murderous application of this power to himself and to the rest of his fellows. Our mastery of certain technological skills has not resulted in the humanization of the world.

Instead of solving problems, it is only increasing them. This is because we have thrown out revelation and are relying wholly upon reason.

Revelation is simply truth that we cannot know by reason. That is all. It is what Paul calls, in First Corinthians 2, “a secret and hidden wisdom of God.” He says, “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory,” {2 Cor 2:8 RSV}. When he speaks of the rulers of this age, he is not talking about kings and princes, necessarily. He is talking about leaders of human thought in every realm. And he says there is in existence a body of knowledge, a secret, hidden wisdom, which is imparted by God to men, but only on certain terms, which none of the rulers of this age knew, in all their cleverness and wisdom. Had they known this, they would have never crucified the Lord of glory. Here was a body of very clever men who boasted in the fact that they could recognize true worth when they saw it. But when incarnate Truth stood before them, when the Son of God himself stood in front of them in all his perfection, they did not recognize him. They thought he was nothing but the off-scouring of the earth, and that he deserved nothing but a felon's death. They crucified him, because they had thrown out revelation and were clinging only to the power of their own mental reasoning.

Revelation, in the full sense, is really Scripture interpreted by the Holy Spirit. We have this book, which was given to us by God, as Paul declared to Timothy: “All scripture is inspired by God,” {2 Tim 3:16a RSV}. It did not originate with man. Man is only the channel it has come through. “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved [or borne along] by the Holy Spirit,” Peter says {cf, 1 Pet 1:21}. The writers of the New Testament sat down and wrote letters, just as we would write them today, expressing their feelings, their reactions, their attitudes, and their ideas in the most natural and

uncomplicated manner. But in their doing so, the strange mystery of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit worked through them to guide, to direct, to inspire, to motivate, to choose the very words which gather up and express God's thoughts to men. This marvelous, secret, and hidden wisdom – which we cannot learn in school, nor find in any of the libraries on earth, yet which is absolutely essential to life – was thereby incorporated for us in a book.

But this book is still totally worthless and useless to us if it is not illuminated by the Holy Spirit. We know it is possible to read the Bible and never get anything from it. I met a lady one day who said she had been reading her Bible every day for sixty years, but she had not yet discovered the simplicity of the gospel, the simplest knowledge of the way of salvation in Jesus Christ. So revelation is not found merely by reading the Bible. It is the Bible illuminated, interpreted, by the Holy Spirit. And it takes both – the Word and the Spirit.

As we have been seeing together in this series, the purpose of all of revelation is directly concerned with us. It is in order that we, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, may come to “mature manhood” {Eph 4:13 RSV} in Christ. As he goes on to say, it is in order that we will stop being babies, will stop being children in kindergarten, playing around with the ABC's of life. It is in order that we will begin to grasp life with such vitality and such vigor of purpose that we begin to grow as God intended us to grow, until we come at last to the full expression of Jesus Christ, living in us. The purpose of all of revelation is to fulfill God's original intention in creating the world and the universe in the first place – that we might be a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself. Anything short of this is a failure to realize what God has provided for.

The Old Testament's part in this, as we saw in our last study, is essentially that of preparation. The purpose of the Old Testament is to awaken desire in our hearts, to create a sense of anticipation, to make us ready to lay hold of something we do not yet possess.

It isn't exactly designed to make us hunger and thirst, because there is a sense in which life itself does that. We can live without any Bible at all, and we will discover as we do that there is created in our lives some deep-seated hungers which express themselves in rather strange ways, ways we can hardly recognize. Our activities become merely a

continual restless search for the satisfaction of those deep-seated urges of the inner life.

However, the Old Testament is designed to articulate this hunger and to put life into terms we can see and express, to define the thirst of the soul, so that we realize what it is we desire. Until we allow it to do that for us, it is impossible to lay hold of all that can really satisfy us. We all know how it is to wake up with a vague, undefined, hazy sense of wanting something – we hardly know what. We vainly try this and that and the other thing, hoping something will satisfy. But the problem is that we have never defined our hunger. We don't know what it is we want. So life becomes a continual merry-go-round of attempting to discover some new activity or pleasure or possession which we hope will satisfy this restless urge of the heart.

The Old Testament has magnificent ability to focus this down in definable terms and to help us see what it is we are looking for. As we read the lives of these old men and women of faith, we say, “Ah, that's it! That is what I need.” As we open the Psalms and read them, they speak to us out of the deep experience of the human heart. And we say, “That is what I want. That is what I mean to say. That is the need of my life and heart.” This is why the Old Testament is so essential to us.

Perhaps this is the explanation, if any is needed at all, for why Jesus came to the Jews. Why didn't he come to the Germans or the Americans or some other nation on earth? He came to the Jews because they were the nation which had the Old Testament.

Therefore, in some sense, they were prepared to receive what God was offering in Christ. Not all received him. But among that nation some were prepared already by the anticipatory quality of the Old Testament to lay hold of the means to life and light and glory when he came.

Surely this is why the many today who read only the New Testament can only go so far in grasping the fullness that is in Jesus Christ – because their hearts are not adequately prepared. Our lives are always shallow and limited if we are trying to grasp something for which we are not quite ready, if we are forever trying to lay hold of truth we are not prepared to understand. This is why we need so deeply and continuously the ministry of the Old Testament.

If the Old Testament prepares, then the New Testament fulfills. It is designed to meet the needs

created and expressed by the Old Testament. It does so by unveiling to our hungry hearts the One who was sent to meet human needs. Jesus said:

“If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink.” {John 7:37 RSV}

“If any one eats of this bread [referring to himself], he will live for ever.” {cf, John 6:58}

“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest,” {Matt 11:28 RSV}

“He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life,” {John 8:12b RSV}

All the needs the human heart can conceive of are met in him. The purpose of the New Testament is to be a channel by which the Holy Spirit, illuminating the pages as we read, makes the living Jesus Christ real to our hearts. In the preceding study, we saw that the letter to the Hebrews opens with the statement that “at sundry times and in diverse manners,” as the King James translation read, or “in many and various ways, God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets,” {Heb 1:1 RSV} – that is, the Old Testament – incomplete, never giving a final message – “but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son,” {Heb 1:2a RSV}. There is the New Testament – the answer to all the yearning and hungering we find in the Old Testament.

There is another verse in Hebrews which sums up the whole New Testament in one brief phrase. In Hebrews 2, the writer is stating that all the earth was to be subjected to man, and that God intended that man should be in dominion over it. We read in Verse 8,

Now in putting everything in subjection to man, he [God] left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. {Heb 2:8b RSV}

That is an accurate statement of the present situation. As we look around, we do not yet see much of anything in subjection to man. This is the problem, isn't it?

Why don't things work out the way we think they should?

Why is there always a fly in the ointment?

Why is it that even our fondest dreams, when they are realized, are never as glorious as we anticipated?

“We do not yet see everything in subjection to him.” The stamp of rebellion and futility is upon everything we touch. This is the present situation. But the writer goes on:

But we see Jesus... {Heb 2:9a RSV}

There is the answer. “But we see Jesus.” There is the New Testament, the summary of its message to our hearts. We do not yet see everything in subjection. But the story is not ended. The whole tale has not been told. What we do see is the One who will make it possible. We see Jesus. And in the New Testament, he stands out on every page.

Every division of the New Testament is particularly designed to set forth the Lord Jesus Christ so as to meet the needs of our own lives:

The Gospels are the biographical section of the New Testament. There we learn who Jesus is and what he did: who he is – the Son of God become man for us; and what he did – the cross and the resurrection and all he accomplished in his life. In the gospels we discover the mighty secret which the Son of God manifested among men. There is revealed the most radical principle ever disclosed to man. I don't hesitate to put it in those strong terms.

Once there was a time when, in the fullness of my ignorance upon graduating from seminary, I thought the gospels were hardly worth reading. Really! I had heard that the Gospels were merely the story of the life of Jesus. I knew there was some value in them, but what appealed to men and what I thought was the most important part of the New Testament were the epistles of Paul. Some of my teachers very unwisely reinforced this notion, instructed me to give my attention almost exclusively to the epistles, and promised that if I could grasp them, then I would be complete and perfect and able to astonish everyone, including myself. But I found I couldn't grasp the epistles without the Gospels. I desperately needed the Gospels, for as I turned to them and read the life of Jesus Christ and saw him portrayed in the four magnificent images presented there, I finally saw revealed the secret which has transformed my own life and ministry. The most radical, revolutionary statement ever pre-

sent to the mind of man is revealed in the life of Jesus Christ in the Gospels. He stated it himself, over and over again in a variety of ways.

For instance, “As I live by means of the Father, even so shall he who eats of me live by means of me, by means of my life in him,” {cf, John 6:57}. This declaration we read in the Gospel accounts, and it is the explanation of all he did – the miracles he wrought, the words he spoke, the power he exercised among men. And finally, it is the explanation for all he accomplished through the cross and the resurrection.

When we turn to the book of **The Acts**, we have the account of the beginning of the church. And the church is nothing more nor less than the body of Jesus Christ today, through which he intends to keep on being who he is and doing what he did. What he did was to pour out his life in order that he might pour it into a body of people who would express that life throughout the entire planet Earth. The book of The Acts is but the simple, straightforward telling of how this body was formed, how it was filled with the Holy Spirit, and how it began to thrust out from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria unto the uttermost parts of the earth, setting forth the glory of the life of the Son of God, and yet at work among men, in the same magnificent ministry that was his when he was here in the flesh – opening the eyes of the blind, setting at liberty those who are held captive, comforting those who need comfort – in other words, transforming and changing the lives of men everywhere.

When we turn to the **Epistles**, we have the Lord set forth again in terms of an explanation of how he is, who he is in us, and how he did what he did. These are uncomplicated letters, as you know, and there is nothing more artlessly revealing than a letter. If I wanted to know what people were like without sitting down and talking to them, the best way I could do it would be to get hold of some of their letters. There is nothing like a letter to indicate what we are. In the letters of the New Testament, we find explained for us in very practical terms, over and over again, how Christ lives his life in us, how he is what he is through us, and how what he did becomes relevant to life around us, in terms of our own personality.

These letters are almost all composed in the same simple pattern. The first part is doctrinal, the

second part practical. The first part is simply a setting forth of truth. The second is the applying of it. Truth must be applied. As the Lord Jesus said,

“You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” {John 8:32 RSV}

Until we begin to learn who he is and what he does, and then apply it in the specific activities of our own life and heart, we can read our Bibles for years and years, and yet go on totally unchanged – completely untouched by all the magnificent truths that pass through our minds.

This was visibly demonstrated not long ago when I attended a pastors' conference. Many laymen think that if anybody exemplifies what the Christian life ought to be, it is a pastor, and that if you could get with a whole group of them it would be almost like heaven on earth – that you would be right at the portals of heaven. Let me tell you something: it isn't that way at all! A number of us were visibly shocked at the level of spiritual life among these pastors. Here were men who were defeated, discouraged, absolutely at a loss to know where to turn or what to do, spending their time beating their breasts in an earnest endeavor to call God to their rescue, totally ignorant of, or at least ignoring, what he had already done for them – living in frightful unbelief. This is the problem in the Christian experience.

A man spoke at an evening meeting and gave an excellent message on Paul's declaration in First Corinthians: “We have the mind of Christ,” {1 Cor 2:16}. Then we had a prayer meeting. To my utter amazement and astonishment, pastor after pastor prayed to this effect:

“Oh, God, give us the mind of Christ!”

“Oh, if we could just have the mind of Christ!” What do the Scriptures say? “We have the mind of Christ.” What kind of faith is it that prays, “Give me the mind of Christ”? All the marvelous promises of the Scriptures are continually being set aside by Christians because we do not believe what they say. We are always asking God for things he already has granted us. He is urging us on, saying, “Help yourself!” But we stand there and say, “Oh, give, it to me! Oh, if I only had it, what I could do!”

We recently watched on television as a new President of the United States took office. All of us were tremendously moved by the circumstances.

Our hearts were grieved for the Kennedy family. And the heart of the nation went out in a great wave of sympathy for President Johnson as he assumed his office under most remarkable conditions. He took the oath of office before they left the airport in Dallas, huddled together in the plane. It was not a very impressive place to enter into the office of President of the United States, nor was it under desirable circumstances. However, when he raised his right hand, with his other hand on the Bible, and repeated the simple lines of the oath of office, he became the President. He believed it. And he began to act like the President. Immediately, he started issuing orders and straightening things out and calling men to his office – even before he moved into the White House. He began immediately to act as the President of the United States. He didn't look any different; perhaps he did not feel any different. He had no outward change. There was simply a word which he believed, and on the basis of that word, his entire life began to change, because he believed that the oath made him President of the United States.

The purpose of the Epistles is simply to set before us in the clearest, most practical language the splendid truths which are involved in this great principle: Jesus Christ lives his life in us. Not only are these truths stated for us, but they are continually applied in the most practical way to every circumstance and situation we can encounter. There is in the epistles a wonderfully varied and complete covering of every point of view. Every problem that can ever come our way is touched.

We find the truth coming through the personalities of the writers of these letters:

- There is Peter the fisherman, using the key to open the door, always presenting the beginnings of spiritual things, catching men at the beginning of life. That is what a fisherman does.
- There is Paul the tentmaker, always constructing and building and completing, sewing something together, making something. That is a tentmaker's job.
- There is John the net mender. That is what he was doing when Christ first found him. And John's ministry is one of repairing and restoring

and bringing back to God's original pattern. What a vital ministry this is!

Finally we come to the book of **Revelation**. This is the only book in the New Testament which deals completely with prophecy. Here we have unveiled for us the time when who he is, and what he did, will become evident to all the universe. Here we read and comprehend the magnificent story of how the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, how he shall reign forever and ever, and how the secret which is revealed in the Gospels, i.e., that man is to be totally available to an indwelling God, enables a great multitude from every tribe and nation on the earth, from all peoples and tongues in every age and era of all time, to triumph in victory over all the concentrated forces of sin, death, hell, and over all the howling demons of doubt, despair, and delinquency that ever plagued the steps of man. This is all set forth for us in Revelation.

The message of the New Testament is fundamentally quite simple. As Paul puts it in Colossians 1, it is: "Christ in you the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b RSV}. We do not have any hope if we do not have that. If Christ is not active in you, and you have not already begun to experience the mystery of his life being lived in you, then,

- First of all, you are not a Christian, and
- Second, you have no hope –

no hope of glory, no hope of fulfillment, no hope of ever being anything, in the final analysis, other than a non-entity, a total zero in life! All this is involved in this vastly important secret.

The hymn writer puts it beautifully: "Peace, perfect peace..." But we cannot grasp the message of this hymn unless we notice its punctuation, because it has a rather peculiar structure. There are two lines in every verse. The first line ends with a question mark. The second line answers the question. The questions all concern life right now, and the answers are aspects of "Christ in you."

"Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?" that is not a statement; it is a question. Is it really possible to have perfect peace in this dark world of sin? The answer: "The blood of Jesus whispers peace within."

“Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?” Is that your problem – that stack of ironing you've got to do, that big load of papers you've got to correct, all the work piled up before you which you can see now in your mind's eye you'll never get done? Peace, when all these duties storm in upon you? What is the answer? “To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.”

“Peace, perfect peace, with sorrow surging round?” When your heart is gripped with some overwhelming catastrophe, striking into your life leaving you despairing and grieving, can you find peace then? The answer: “On Jesus' bosom naught but calm is found.”

“Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?” Nothing is more capable of striking fear into the heart than the specter of the unknown, the veil before us beyond which we cannot see, the threat which lies unvoiced, silent out there – we hardly know what it is. Can we have peace in the face of such a menace? The answer: “Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.” As someone has said, “We do not know what the future holds, but we know him who holds the future!”

“Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?” In the midst of a world in the grip of death, when all this human evil surrounds us and “death reigns” in human life, as Scripture puts it, can you find peace there? The answer: “Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.” There is the answer to life.

And the purpose of the New Testament is simply to unveil to us the One who is the full answer to all our needs. If it doesn't do that, it has not served its purpose. It is to us a totally useless book. For it

isn't the Bible, really, that we need. It is the Christ who is seen in the Bible. The Bible itself is a mere instrument. And once we have seen the message of the living Person, it is possible, under circumstances that may come, not to have a Bible at all. It isn't the Bible that sustains us: It is Christ. It is his life. It is all he is, made available to us, right now. This is what transforms us. The New Testament was written in order that we may see him – Christ in you, the hope of glory. We do not yet see everything in subjection to him, but we see Jesus.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, how thankful we are for this mighty truth we have just been thinking of. The glory of the Lord Jesus, who is present among us, fills our hearts and lives. We pray you will open our eyes to grasp this in fullness – that many of us struggling to find something as an answer to life will suddenly have scales drop from our eyes so that we may see him. We pray for our young people who, passing through life, are oftentimes wrapped up in the “now,” hardly aware of these realities, seeking only that which is immediately before them. May they too see him. May their hearts long for him and yearn for him. May they anticipate and hunger after that which only the Holy Spirit can provide, and then, finding him, find all that will make them men and women full and complete in Jesus Christ. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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