

THE BREAKTHROUGH POINT

by Ray C. Stedman

Everything that occurred during the Feast of Tabernacles was designed to remind the Israelites of the time their forefathers spent in the wilderness. For the duration of the feast they dwelt in booths made of tree limbs. This reminded them of how they had lived in tents in the wilderness. On each day of the feast a pitcher of water from the pool of Siloam was poured over the altar in the temple to remind them of the days in the wilderness when God had given them water out of a rock. With exquisite sensitivity Jesus enters into the meaning of that symbolism and uses it to point to himself, in the words in Chapter 7 of John's gospel, "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. ... 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water,'" {John 7:37-38 RSV}.

Today we come to another of those wonderful symbols, in the opening words of Verse 12 of Chapter 8 of the gospel:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." {John 8:12 RSV}

These marvelously gracious words are a reflection on the ceremony that took place each evening in the temple courts, when two giant candelabra (two Menorahs, the many-branched candlesticks used by the Jews), were lighted and they illuminated the whole the temple court. It is in reference to this that Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world [not merely Israel but the world; to anybody, anywhere]; he who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life."

We must take seriously these beautiful words because Jesus means them. These are not a politician's promise, like those we are hearing so frequently today, promises that can all be forgotten after the election. Our Lord means to fulfill these words in any human life: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me [not just knows about me], he who walks with me, obeys me and stays with me will have light in his pathway."

That is a wonderful promise. There is nothing we need more in this world today than light in our path. People are walking in darkness. Later on in this very gospel Jesus declares, "He that walks in darkness does not know where he is going," {cf, John 12:35}. How many people do not know where they are going, not only after they leave this life, but even down the road a little. They have no idea of what is ahead; they are running into disaster and they cannot even see it coming. But the man who has light can see what is in his pathway.

Years ago, when I was driving from Dallas to Southern California, I picked up a couple of young hitchhikers. As we were driving past the entrance to the Grand Canyon, I asked them if they had ever seen the canyon. They said, "No," so we decided to spend the night there. It was late at night and pitch black when we turned off the road. We could not see a thing, but we found what seemed to be an open space and crawled into our sleeping bags. When I awoke in the morning the sun was up. I stretched and threw out my arms, only to find that my left arm dropped down in the void! In the darkness of the dead of the night we had actually made our bed on the edge of a cliff that dropped into the Grand Canyon! If we had gone two steps further we would have fallen over the edge. I gave grateful thanks for the light that morning. That is what the light is for.

Years ago I ran across a wonderful quotation from Dr. Phillips Brooks, who was a preacher in the early part of this century. Here is how he described the sunrise:

When the sun rose this morning it found the world in darkness, torpid and heavy and asleep, with powers all wrapped up in sluggishness; with life that was hardly better or more alive than death. The sun found this great sleeping world and woke it. It bade it to be itself. It quickened every slow and sluggish faculty. It called to the dull streams and said, "Be quick;" to the dull birds and bade them sing; to the dull fields and made them grow; to dull men and women and bade them think and talk and work.

It flashed electric invitation to the whole mass of sleeping power which really was the world and summoned it to action. It did not make the world. It did not start another set of processes unlike those which had been sluggishly moving in the darkness. It poured strength into the essential processes which belonged to the very nature of the earth. It glorified, intensified and fulfilled the earth.

I am sure that is what our Lord means because he always draws symbols from nature. In the words, "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness," he means that not only will he give light to the one who follows him, but he will be the means by which that man will see everything else in his path; and he will be summoned to fulfillment; he will be energized and fulfilled and intensified by the light.

I can bear personal testimony that this is true, as many of you can also. I have found that if I want to understand this crazy, turbulent, mixed-up world, where a thousand and one explanations are being hurled at me all the time by the media, I need to listen to the words of the Lord Jesus. Here is One who knows life, who understands it, who explains it and corrects it. He can help us distinguish between that which is true and that which is false, that which is death and that which is life. As I have sought to follow him all my life I have found these words to be wonderfully true. He not only gives me light so that I do not walk in darkness, but, more than that, I "will have the light of life." He makes us light as well, in other words. The life he gives us becomes a light to others, and we begin to help them also. That is the beautiful picture these words convey.

In the verses that follow we discern something of the darkness of the men to whom he was speaking -- darkness that was keeping them from coming to the light. Here we can see why it is that every person in the world needs Jesus Christ -- everyone -- and what it is that holds men and women back from the light and allows them to spend their whole lives, sometimes, in darkness. There are two things that keep people from opening their hearts to Christ: ignorance and pride; ignorance of the facts, and pride that refuses to bow to those facts and adjust to them.

Notice, in Verse 14, the words Jesus addresses to these men, "I know whence I have come... but you do not know." "You do not know..." That is ignorance. Then in Verse 19, "You know neither me nor my Father." "You don't know me. You don't know my Father." That is ignorance, and that is what Jesus is talking about. Ignorance is what is holding millions in darkness right now. Many have never heard of Jesus, and many of those who have heard of him have heard a distorted, twisted, unreal picture of him that makes him appear to be what he is not in the Scripture. It is very important that we see the true Jesus. This is the task of the church -- that we might tell this story in its simplicity and beauty in such a way that people will actually see who Jesus is. He will draw them to him.

The amazing thing is that these people listening to him are ignorant of the facts even in the very presence of Jesus himself.

The Pharisees then said to him, "You are bearing witness to yourself; your testimony is not true." Jesus answered, "Even if I do bear witness to myself, my testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going, but you do not know whence I come or whither I am going. You judge according to the flesh, I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgment is true, for it is not I alone that judge, but I and he who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two men is true; I bear witness to myself, and the Father who sent me bears witness to me." {John 8:13-18 RSV}

What these men are saying is that they are rejecting Jesus on the basis of a very narrow portion of the evidence about him. That is all they looked at -- a few facts about him which they could find fault with. They never looked at the whole mass of evidence of who he was, as is the case with many people today. The Pharisees said to him, "You are making these claims but they are all from your own mouth. How can we believe you when you are the only one that claims this? How do we know that you are not a madman, because the things you claim are incredible? Yet you expect us to believe you when you are the only one who says these things." At first glance that sounds reasonable. We constantly have to be on watch that we are not taken in by somebody who claims to be something that he really is not. We ought to have more evidence than the evidence of the man making the claim. This is the basis of the argument of the Pharisees.

Notice what Jesus says in his powerful, irrefutable answer:

First, he declares, "Even if these are my own claims about myself that is no reason to reject them." It may be reasonable to say, "I am not going to decide yet to accept your claims. I am going to look for more evidence." But what Jesus is saying is, "Merely because I claim these certain things is no reason to reject them. They may be true. What you need to do is look for more evidence. You may suspend judgment on this basis, but do not reject my claims."

Then, secondly, "My knowledge about myself is much greater than your knowledge about me. I know more facts about me than you do. I know who I am. I know where I have come from, and I know where I am going." I have come to see that a remarkable principle of life is that people who know who they are always have a sense of confidence; they always feel secure, they are always able to stand up against the assaults and even the accusations of others. But people who do not know who they are, who are not sure exactly where they came from and where they are going are wobbly and wishy-washy, uncertain and undependable.

This is certainly true of Christians. When Christians really believe what God says about them, when they refuse to listen even to their own feelings that lie to them about who they are, but they believe God has made them new creatures in Jesus Christ and they are free from the old life, the old sinful habits, they always have a tremendous sense of security and of effectiveness in their lives. That is what our Lord had. What marvelous serenity he displayed as he moved with confidence and courage through all the upset, the strife and the conflicting claims that he lived through! That is why he can say to these Pharisees, "I know who I am but you do not."

Furthermore, he tells them, they are not interested in finding out who he is; that is the problem. Remember that in Chapter 5 he had said to these very men, "If you believed Moses you would believe me because Moses wrote about me," {cf, John 5:46}. They had the Old Testament Scriptures; if they had but read them, and understood what they said, they would have had ample evidence that Jesus was the Messiah. But they did not believe the Old Testament.

Many people today are struggling with their Christian lives for this very reason: They really do not believe what the Word of God says; thus they have no confidence or any awareness of who Jesus is.

The third thing Jesus tells these men is, "You reject my claims because you look only at appearances. You judge according to the flesh. You regard me as nothing but a troublesome tub-thumper, a rabble-rouser who makes claims he has no right to; one who has no political influence, no wealth, no standing and no political power, and so you reject me. You even think I came from Nazareth, in Galilee, and for that reason you say I am not the Messiah. But you never investigated and found that I was born in Bethlehem, according to the word of the prophet. You do not know me at all. You judge by superficial things. You think that as the Messiah I am supposed to lead a revolt against Rome -- and I will, in God's time -- but because I do not do it yet you reject me. You never read the Old Testament that says many things have to come before that." Like many people today they were saying "No" to Jesus because of insufficient evidence. But they never bothered to look at the evidence that was there. "I do not judge people by outward appearances," Jesus declares. "I know what is in the hearts of men."

Finally, the fourth thing he points out in his answer to the Pharisees is, "As a matter of fact, I do fulfill the Law. Your Law says one has to have two witnesses to be accepted. I have two witnesses. I myself am one." This is perfectly proper. A man is always free to give witness (testimony) about himself in any court of law. But if what he says is corroborated by another witness then it is much more acceptable. Jesus declares, "I am one, and my Father is one. Thus we fulfill the demand of the Law. You ought to accept that."

In the words, "My Father bears witness of me," Jesus is referring to what we have already seen in this gospel -- the three ways the Father underscored and supported his claims:

First, of course, there were the marvelous signs that he did. These were not mere sleight-of-hand wonders, miracles or magic tricks that he did to attract attention. He was not out to try to heal a few people in order to get the crowds to come and listen to him. He never used miracles in that way. Every sign he performed, as we have seen, had a deep and marvelous meaning in itself; it revealed something about him; and these were done

by the power of the Father. Everywhere men and women were saying of him, "Nobody can do the things that this man does unless God is with him," {cf, John 3:2}. That was a testimony of the Father.

Secondly, there was the inner conviction of the heart. When people listened to Jesus they said, "He knows what he is talking about. This One knows life. He speaks as no other man ever spoke," {cf, John 7:46}. They went home saying to themselves, "You know, he is right. This is the way things are. This is the way I feel inside. It corresponds with my experience." That was the witness of the Father.

The third way the Father underscored and supported the claims of Jesus was through the fulfillment of the Scriptures themselves. How many times in the actions of Jesus, in his words, in the circumstances in which he found himself -- things over which he often had no control -- there was completely fulfilled the predictions of the Old Testament. Despite this constant witness set before these people of who Jesus was, however, they rejected it because they were ignorant of the facts.

They were also ignorant of the Father. Verse 19:

They said to him therefore, "Where is your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me, you would know my Father also." These words he spoke in the treasury, as he taught in the temple; but no one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. {John 8:19-20 RSV}

Why did they not arrest him? Because the invisible hand of the Father was restraining them. We have already seen that, despite their rejection of Jesus, their ignorance, and their unwillingness to accept his claims -- and, as a result, all the hatred and the scorn they felt for him -- they could not stop him. Even though he spoke out in public right in the temple courts where the offering was taken, where everybody had to pass through, yet no one could arrest him because the Father was with him.

One of the amazing things about this story is that, although these men were claiming to know God, they really did not know him. I find this is the problem with many people today. They say they know God, but the god they are talking about is a god of their own imagination. They are merely projecting an idea about God that is not real; consequently they do not know God at all. Neither do they worship God; they are worshiping a figment of their imagination. I ran across a quote from Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that speaks to this:

Their god is something which they created themselves, a being who is always prepared to oblige and excuse them. They do not worship him with awe and respect, indeed they do not worship him at all. They reveal that their so-called god is no god at all in their talk. For they are forever saying that "they simply cannot believe that God will punish the unrepentant sinner to all eternity, and this and that." They cannot believe that God will do so, therefore, they draw the conclusion that God does not and will not. In other words, God does what they believe he ought to do or not do. What a false and blasphemous conception of God! How utterly untrue and unworthy! Such is the new paganism of today.

That is why many people do not come to the light: Their willful ignorance blinds their hearts. They do not know Jesus, and they do not know God.

Then John turns to the second reason why men and women remain in darkness, and that is because of their pride.

Again he said to them, "I go away, and you will seek me and die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." Then said the Jews, "Will he kill himself, since he says, 'Where I am going, you cannot come?'" {John 8:21-22 RSV}

You have to read those words as a sarcastic answer to what Jesus said, because that is what it is -- a word that is dripping with sarcastic, self-righteous pride. In response to his words, "Where I am going you cannot come," they reply, "Where is he going, then? Is he going to kill himself?" The Pharisees believed that suicides went to the deepest place in hell, where there was a special torment reserved for them. Thus their grim and sarcastic response is, "Of course we'll never go there. We could never follow him there. If that is what he is going to do, he is right; we can't follow him." That is rejection because of pride. These men did not consider

themselves worthy of death. On the contrary, they regarded themselves as good and decent people whom God could never send to hell or shut out from heaven.

Listen to how straightforwardly, clearly and faithfully Jesus answers them.

He said to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. {John 8:23 RSV}

In other words, "All of your thinking is limited by the narrow confines of this life. You do not understand what is going on in the invisible realms of life. You do not see what is bringing to pass all the historical occurrences of earth. You do not see the hand of God or the hand of the devil. You do not understand anything beyond the limited, narrow range of facts which you can see with your eyes and hear with your ears. But I am from beyond that. I am from above, from out of this world."

"I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he." They said to him, "Who are you?" Jesus said to them, "Even what I have told you from the beginning. I have much to say about you and much to judge; but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him." They did not understand that he spoke to them of the Father. {John 8:24-27 RSV}

How blind they were! Our Lord is saying, "Because you are so limited in your outlook, because you are looking at life only from the standpoint of what is happening from day to day you are in unconscious bondage to the god of this world. You are living in slavery that will end finally in death and hell. I am the only way out." How faithful he was to these men!

This is what many people today say they do not want to hear -- they do not want to hear anything about hell. But, in the New Testament, Jesus is the one who says most about hell. Now he does not describe it except in terms of these words in this passage, "Where I am you cannot follow." Hell is a place of eternal separation from all that is beautiful, all that is true, all that is lovely, all that is exciting, all that is living and fulfilling. The opposite of all that, the removal of all that, the removal of God from life, is what people choose when they refuse to hear the claims of Jesus Christ.

I am amazed and awed at how earnestly Jesus deals with these men in their blindness. These are not words of anger or bitter rejection or accusation or condemnation. This is an earnest pleading on his part: "You are going to die -- everybody is -- and you will die in sin unless you lay hold of the provision God has made for the sin of mankind." But they in their pride were blinding their eyes and rejecting this word because they thought they were good enough already; they thought they did not deserve any rejection from God.

At the Mount Hermon pastors' conference a few weeks ago I was interested to hear Dr. Bruce Waltke tell the pastors, "I know men who have been drawn to God by his love and by the glory and the promises of God, but I have to tell you this: That is not the way I came. I came because my heart was frightened by the sense of the wrath of God." Here Jesus is simply dealing honestly with these men and pointing out what is absolutely and certainly going to happen unless they lay hold of the one way out, which is his sacrifice for them.

It is clear that his seriousness startles and sobers them. They say to him, "Who are you?" His reply, however, is not the bland statement found here in the Scriptures, "Even what I have told you from the beginning." That is a poor translation. There is no word for "from the beginning" there. The words are, "The beginning, that which I have told you." It is a phrase that ought to be translated, "Absolutely and fundamentally what I have told you all along. Absolutely what I am, that is who I am. What I have been saying to you all along." Then Jesus says, "I have much more to say to you about you, and it is all true because it comes from the One who sent me." John has to record sadly, "They did not understand that he spoke to them of the Father."

It looks hopeless, doesn't it? Ignorance is blocking the minds of these men; pride is blinding their eyes and keeping them from action. But do not stop reading here. There is a wonderful paragraph that comes next. Knowing their blindness, knowing their pride, knowing their ignorance,

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." {John 8:28-29 RSV}

John records that when Jesus uttered these words,

As he spoke thus, many [many of these very men who had been rejecting him] believed in him. {John 8:30 RSV}

What made the difference? The cross. What does Jesus mean, "When you have lifted up the Son of man"? When you see Jesus on the cross then you begin to understand the facts about life. That is what he is saying. When he is lifted up on the cross he gives himself for the sins of the world. When that occurs in history or to the eyes of faith, then you will begin to see Jesus for who he is: the Lord of Glory, the Liberator of man, the Redeemer from our sins, the Cleanser from our shame, the One who can wash away all our stain and forgive us. And you will see the power of his Word. You will see that he speaks with authority as the Father taught him. Further, you will see the sinless beauty of the Son of God who is the delight of the Father's heart, the Model Man, man as God intended man to be. All that becomes visible when you think of the cross of Jesus.

It is very good for us often to remember the story of the cross. It is good to remember all the detail that is given in the Gospels about how in the upper room he was "exceeding sorrowful unto death"; the shadows of Gethsemane; the deep darkness of his loneliness; his prayers; his disappointment with his disciples; the bloody sweat that fell from his brow; the traitor's kiss; the binding; the blow in the face; the scourging, the smiting, the spitting, the buffeting, the mocking; the crown of thorns; the sorrowful way through the city streets; the burden of the cross; the exhaustion that he endured; the collapse; the stripping; the impaling upon the cross; the nails through his hands; the jeers of his foes; the flight of his friends; the hours on the cross; the darkness; the terrible cry that came from his lips, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"; the thirst; and the triumphant cry at the end, "It is finished."

When you remember that, Jesus declares, then you will see the awful reality of human depravity, the terrible evil that lurks in every single human heart without exception that makes it necessary for us to lay hold of the one way out, which is the Lord Jesus himself. There you will see the love of God spelled out for us, a God who could give his only Son, "who spared not his only Son, but gave himself up for us, how much will he also freely give us all other things," {cf, Rom 8:32}. That is why the cross is such an important thing in Christian faith, and why we make it the symbol of our faith -- because it is there you begin to see life the way it really is.

When I was a boy of 11, I came to Christ in an old Methodist Brush Arbor meeting -- the sawdust trail, literally. I went down front and received the Lord. It was a real conversion because I had a wonderful sense of fellowship with the Lord for months and months after that. One of the things I used to delight to do, even though I was only 11 years old, was to sing to myself some of the great hymns of the church that we have been singing from Sunday to Sunday. I loved those hymns because they reminded me of who my Savior was and what he had done for me. I used to get up in a hay rack on a Sunday afternoon all by myself and sing these hymns until the tears ran down my cheeks. I remember being in a park once, sitting by myself, and singing one hymn in particular,

Jesus, keep me near the cross,
There a precious fountain
Free to all a healing stream,
Flows from Calvary's mountain.

Near the cross I'll watch and wait,
Hoping, trusting ever,
Till I reach the golden strand,
Just beyond the river.

I love that hymn because it says something to me about the power of the cross of Christ to take away and strip

off all the illusions of life and let us see ourselves exactly where God sees us -- needing him desperately but finding him available to us to give light on our pathway and to walk with us through life.

Title: The Breakthrough Point
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: The Gospel of John
Scripture: John 8:12-30
Message No: 24
Catalog No: 3854
Date: February 26, 1984

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