

The Goal of Revelation

by Ray C. Stedman

The Bible, as you know, is not merely a collection of books: It is a divine library. It was written during the course of some fifteen centuries, and forty or more authors contributed to it, some of whom we know, some we do not know. It is a book of wonderful variety. There are beautiful love stories which reflect the tenderest and most delicate of human passions; there are stories of political intrigue and maneuvering which rival anything we know in the 20th Century. There are stories of blood and thunder and gore which almost make the blood run cold. There are poetic passages which soar to the very heights of loveliness. There are simple accounts of homely little everyday occurrences. There are narratives of intense interest and intricate plot. There are strange and cryptic passages filled with weird symbols and allegories which are difficult to penetrate and comprehend.

Yet through all this variety there runs one coherent theme. This makes the Bible notably greater than anything humanity could produce. For despite the tremendous diversity of human authorship and the vast span of time over which it was written, which precludes the possibility of collusion, nevertheless these writers produced a book which has one message. It tells one story, moves to one point, and directs our attention to one Person. So one of the chief reasons we can accept the Bible as the Word of God is that it would simply be impossible to take at random any collection of books from literature, put them together under one cover, and have any remotely related theme develop. It would still be impossible.

But all through the Bible you find the same story, one theme tracing its way – essentially, the story of man! It is the story of your life, of my life. It tells us what we are because it tells us what man is. And since all of us share human life together,

this is primarily and preeminently the book that goes with man. It explains man. It instructs us, exhorts us, admonishes us, corrects us, strengthens us, teaches us. It leads us into all the truth concerning ourselves. And, of course, it is the book about man primarily because it is the book about Jesus Christ, the Son of man. The whole book is the glorious story of how God became flesh, the immortal became mortal, the Eternal One became a temporal being like ourselves, for a while, in becoming man. In the story which gathers around this theme, God has incorporated all the truths we need to know about ourselves.

The Bible tells a fascinating story, and even the story of how the book came into being is one of sheer fascination. In his second letter (1:21), Peter tells us the Bible was written by men who were moved by the Holy Spirit:

... no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. {1 Pet 1:21 RSV}

No one has ever been able to analyze that process. How was it that ordinary men like ourselves, some from the most common callings of life could have been so led by the Holy Spirit in recording what they thought and felt that they could have captured in human words the thoughts and attitudes of God, and not mere men's opinions? We do not know. It is an amazing miracle.

The more you work with the Bible's truth, the more thrilling it becomes. I have been studying this book for decades, and I confess to you that it has grown more fascinating, more mysterious, more marvelous in its implications as my appreciation of its truth has increased. To me, studying the Bible is like studying the physical universe around us. The more men probe into the secrets of the uni-

verse, the more complex they find it to be – the more mysterious in its makeup, and the more fascinating in its relationships. This is true of the Word of God. The more we study the book, the more it begins to unfold its wonders, and we discover that there are vast areas yet unknown which we have not begun to plumb.

Our Bible was written by men moved of the Holy Spirit. It has been kept and preserved for us through the centuries in strange and providential ways. It has been defended by blood, sweat, and tears, has come to us with its pages wet with the blood of martyrs. It cost men and women their lives that we might have this book!

When we hold it in our hands, sooner or later we ask ourselves: Why was it all put together? What is behind all this? What is its ultimate purpose? What does God want to accomplish by giving us a book like this, and giving us the Holy Spirit to interpret it and make it real in our experience? Of course, these questions are very much to the point, because everything must have a purpose. Certainly nothing that man makes is without purpose. Everything we own was designed with a purpose in mind, took shape in the mind of some man, with a view to accomplishing a specific plan and purpose. Therefore it is certainly logical and reasonable to assume that everything God makes is for a purpose. God has not given us this tremendous book, has not gone to all the trouble to record his words in written form, without having some purpose in mind. What is that purpose? What is it all aiming at? The Bible itself gives us the answer.

There are many places where it is given, but one of the clearest is in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. A number of passages in it state God's definite purpose. He has a plan in mind, and it is only as you and I begin to understand what God's plan is, that we can move in the same direction. Anything else is the utmost futility. Look at Chapter 1, Verses 9-12, for example. In an amazing passage, which merits our study for weeks on end, the apostle says some magnificent things about the Christian and his relationship to God:

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In him, according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:9-12 RSV}

This is a double statement that God has a direct purpose in all that is going on in your life and mine. In Chapter 3, Verses 8-12, we come to the same thought again:

To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in him. {Eph 3:8-12 RSV}

Probably the clearest declaration of this purpose is found in Chapter 4, beginning with Verse 11. Paul has stated that the Lord Jesus, having finished his work here on earth through the cross and the resurrection, ascended to heaven, and gave gifts to men:

And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; {Eph 4:11-13 RSV}

That is God's purpose. It is to bring us "to mature manhood."

Read Verses 12 and 13 again, this time from the Amplified New Testament, in order to grasp them more clearly:

His intention was the perfecting and the full equipping of the saints (His consecrated people), [that they should do] the work of ministering toward building up Christ's body (the church), [that it might develop]

until we all attain oneness in the faith and in the comprehension of the full and accurate knowledge of the Son of God; that [we might arrive] at really mature manhood – the completeness of personality which is nothing less than the standard height of Christ's own perfection – the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and the completeness found in Him. {Eph 4:12-13 Amplified New Testament}

Amazing! Did you notice you are definitely involved in that? The whole record of Scripture, this verse says, all that God has done in human history, including the fascinating account recorded in the pages of his Word – in fact, the whole universe in its physical and moral dimensions – exists that you might become a mature man, that you might fulfill your manhood or your womanhood in Jesus Christ. That is God's purpose. It isn't some far-off, distant goal that we can view only in some impersonal way. It is something which has to do vitally with each of us. All this exists in order that you and I might fulfill the possibilities God has hidden in our humanity. And the measure of that humanity is the measure of the manhood of Jesus Christ.

Working with high school young people in this area, I used to meet regularly with five young men. On one occasion I recall saying to them, "Fellows, tell me this: What is your idea of what a real he-man is?" One of them answered, "I think a real he-man is a guy with a lot of solid muscles." There happened to be a fellow in his high school who had lots of muscle, especially between the ears! I said, "You mean so-and-so." He thought for a minute and said, "No, of course not. He's not much of a man." So I went on, "Obviously, manhood is not muscles. What is it? What is your idea of what it means to be a man?" They all thought for a moment. Then another one replied, "Well, I think a real he-man has guts." We started making a list of things, and wrote down "courage" on a piece of paper. They named other qualities – consideration, kindness, integrity, purpose, and so on. After a while, we had quite a long list. I said to them, "You know, fellows, isn't it amazing that you could go anywhere in the world and stop any man on the streets of any city or even out in the jungles, and that it wouldn't matter whether he were rich or poor, high or low, black or white, red or yellow – if you could speak his language, and you put to him the question, 'What do you think it means to be a

man?' you would get the same answers! Because all men everywhere want to be men. All women want to be women. The ideal they hold in their hearts is exactly the same. There may be small variations in detail, but not in the general thrust. Do you know anywhere on earth where courage is regarded as a vice and cowardice is a virtue? No. Everywhere it is cowardice that is regarded as the vice; it is courage that is admired. This is true anywhere on earth."

Then I said to these fellows, "Do you know anyone who has fulfilled this? How are you doing yourselves?" One of them said, "I think I make it about thirty percent of the time." The others jumped on him right away and said, "No, you wouldn't even make five percent." I questioned, "Do you know anybody who has done it 100%?" For a moment they looked blank. Then their faces lighted up, and they said, "Of course! It was Jesus!" And they were right. There is God's perfect man. There is humanity in its fullest flower.

I don't think there have ever been written more insightful words to describe what manhood really is than these from the pen of Rudyard Kipling:

IF—

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt
you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your
master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your
aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, bro-
ken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out
tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings

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And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on!"

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And – which is more – you'll be a Man, my son!

Now, those are uninspired words, but they capture in a marvelous way the glory of manhood. Who fulfills them? Who has done it? In the course of human history, no one – except One! But that is precisely the aim and end God has in giving us the book of his revelation, i.e., the Bible. It is to make available to us all that he has provided in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. In fact, this is why the universe exists – that you and I might fulfill our humanity.

Let us look at Ephesians 4:13 again. It says that we must come to mature manhood, and that the steps toward that end are twofold:

- First, we are to come to “the knowledge of the Son of God” – the accurate knowledge of the Son of God. There is no possibility of achieving manhood, as God intended man to be, if there is not the knowledge of the Son of God – personally and experientially in the heart. That is paramount.
- The step which takes us to this knowledge is that “we all attain to the unity of the faith.” Faith is always the operative word. Faith is always the way by which we actually experience all that God has made available.

The apostle is careful to make clear that it isn't just *my* faith, or *your* faith, but *our* faith which brings us to this knowledge. In other words, we need each other. In Chapter 3 of this same epistle. Paul prays that we may come to know with all saints what is the height and breadth and length and

depth of the love of Christ. This means that unless you are in touch with other saints you can't possibly develop as you ought to as a Christian. It is impossible to move to maturity unless we are ready to share truth with each other – unless what the Presbyterians know is shared with the Pentecostals, and what the Baptists know is shared with the Episcopalians, and the Catholics share with the Orthodox, and both share with the Seventh Day Adventists. We need each other – to the end that we grow in the knowledge of the Son of God.

This is why the Bible was written. It is all about Jesus Christ, from Genesis to Revelation – in symbol, in story, in marvelous prophetic vision, in simple narrative account, in history, in poetry, in everything – it is all about Jesus Christ. He is the secret of the book. In learning about him we discover that we learn about ourselves also. We discover our true nature as we see it reflected in him. We understand our problems and our reactions as we see his dealings with men. We find all our needs fully met in him.

Major Ian Thomas has written some excellent summaries of the Christian's relationship to Jesus Christ. He wrote this about Christ:

He had to be what he was to do what he did.
He had to be the Son of God. No other could have done it.

He had to be God, manifest in the flesh, the eternal, the immortal one dying upon a cross.

He had to be what he was to do what he did.
And he had to do what he did that we might have what he is.

There is the glory – the good news – of the gospel. It is not particularly good news to be told our sins were forgiven by the shed blood of Jesus Christ if we must then struggle on through this life doing the best we can, falling and failing, struggling and slipping, going through periods of doubt, despair, discouragement, and defeat, until at last we get over on the other side and find the releases we crave. That is not very good news, is it? But that was never intended to be the gospel. The good news is that not only does final fulfillment await us over there, but that right now we may have what he is. Then it follows, according to Ian Thomas, that:

We must have what he is in order to be what he was.

Think about that. What was he? He was perfect man. He was God's ideal man – man as God intended man to be. For thirty-three and a half years – right down here on this sin-drenched planet where you and I live, in the very circumstances and under the same pressures, up against the same problems, the same “contradiction of sinners against himself” we face every day – he lived that life. “We must have what he is in order to be what he was.”

Then, finally:

We will be what he was when by faith we allow him to be what he is.

You see, in the last analysis, it doesn't depend on us. Somebody says, “What do I get out of all this Bible study?” It isn't a question of what you get out of it; it is a question of what God gets out of you. We will be what he was when by faith, when by simply taking him at his word, by believing his astonishing statement that he is quite willing to live his life again through us, we actually count on him to do so – day by day and moment by moment all through our life. If we dare to believe him, we can allow him to be what he is – in us. This is the good news.

For this, we need the word of revelation. We don't come to the knowledge of the Son of God without learning, without a process, without a gradual, deepening understanding of his truth. Someone once said to a Christian, “Will your God give me a hundred dollars?” His reply was, “He will if you know him well enough.” George Mueller, a well-known man of prayer, and founder of the world-famous Bristol Orphanages in England, knew him so well that God gave him millions of dollars. He will give anyone hundreds and thousands and millions of dollars if that will serve his purpose – if you know him well enough. But if you went in to see the President of the United States, for example, you wouldn't start right out by saying, “Give me a hundred dollars, please.” You would get acquainted with him first, wouldn't you? Perhaps after other aspects of your relationship had developed, you might say to him, “You know, friend, I need a hundred dollars.” We never can grow into fullness of maturity until we begin to know Jesus Christ.

We get to know him through the pages of the Scriptures, interpreted to us by the Holy Spirit. We can't separate those two. The Bible without the Spirit leads to dullness and boredom, to a dead Christianity. The Spirit without the Bible leads to fanaticism and wildfire. We need both the Spirit and the Word. And we need the entire Bible:

- For instance, the story of man before the fall is necessary in order that we might know what God made man to be and what to expect in our relationship to him, i.e., what we are to be restored to.
- We need to know the story of the fall itself, to study it, to search out its secrets, in order that we may know the explanation of the strange reactions which arise within us, i.e., our present condition of fallen humanity.
- We need to know the Law in order to know in practical terms what God expects of us, and to recognize our guilt and our helplessness before him.
- We need, too, to know the lives of the men and women of faith throughout the Bible in order to see how God works in specific situations. What an encouragement these lives are to us! As we begin to read our Bible and to learn that David, Ruth, Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Mary, Paul, Peter, and all the others went through the same experiences we do, we understand that God put them there and recorded their reactions in order that we might see our own reactions and, what is more important, learn the way out, the way of escape. Seen this way, our Bible becomes a fascinating, glorious book.
- We need to understand the Prophets in order to see the whole picture to the end, and to have the certainty that God is working all things out.
- We need to begin to know God's thoughts and ways which are higher than ours. We need to understand what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 2:7 as “a secret and hidden

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wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.” As our Lord put it, “Thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes,” {cf, Matt 11:25, Luke 10:21 KJV}.

- We need to know the Gospels in order to see the perfect life of Jesus Christ – this remarkable, magnificent moving of God in human life – which is quite different from anything we can learn outside the Word of God.
- We need to know the Epistles in order to apply the great truths we learn in the Gospels, for the writers of the New Testament letters translate these truths into the most practical daily situations.
- Finally, we need to know the book of Revelation, because in hours of crisis we are now passing through, both as individuals and as a nation, we find there the assurance that the darkness shall pass, the futility will be ended, our bondage shall cease, and Jesus Christ shall indeed be fully and completely manifested in this universe, which belongs to him – “the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.”

This is why Paul wrote to Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, how marvelous is this revelation to us, how magnificent the plan you have for us! Now, in accord with that deep-seated hunger in our own hearts, we can be what we were made to be. How foolishly, like sheep, we wander away from you, blind our eyes to your truth, refuse to listen to your Word or turn to its pages! Teach us, Father, to be obedient children, ready to learn, ready workmen, available at your call. We pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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