

God Spoke in Times Past

by Ray C. Stedman

In this series of studies, we are considering God's entire revelation to us in the Bible. In the first message we examined the purpose of revelation. We found that it aims at the maturing of all of us as individual believers in Christ until, together, we come to fullness of stature – the complete expression of Jesus Christ in the world. It takes the entire Bible to accomplish this, and it takes the work of the Holy Spirit in interpreting this Scripture to us. In this message we will look at the contribution the Old Testament makes – not in detail, but in a rapid survey – gathering up the major thrust of the Old Testament, so that we can have clear in our minds the part it plays in producing that maturity which is the aim of all God has done.

Let us begin with a familiar story from the New Testament. There is an account in the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 24, that I never read without wishing I could have been there. There are few stories in Scripture I can say that about, because I truly believe that since the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, Jesus Christ is more real and more available – his presence in the heart of a believer today is more wonderfully rich – than he ever was to the disciples in the days of his flesh. Therefore, in knowing Jesus our Lord, we in this age have far greater advantage than they ever did. However, there are certain stories in the Gospels which make me long to have been there. This is one of them.

It is the story of an encounter which occurred on the day of the resurrection of our Lord, when two men were walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. The news had come that Jesus had risen, but no one would believe it. It was absolutely incredible to them! The hearts of these men were filled with sorrow as they contemplated the events of that week. The sun had been blotted out of their sky by the death of Jesus. They hardly

knew which way to turn or what to do. All of us who experienced the emotional drain occasioned by the assassination of President Kennedy know at least a little of what they must have felt as they trudged sadly along.

Luke tells us that while they walked they were discussing all the things that had happened. They could hardly speak of anything else, and were intent on their conversation. Without their realizing it, a stranger drew near and accompanied them. As they walked along, this stranger asked them, “What is this you are talking about?” They stopped and looked at him in amazement, and said, “Are you a stranger in Jerusalem, that you don't know what has been happening? Why, the whole city has been filled with the news about how Jesus of Nazareth, the prophet, who we were sure was the Son of God, a mighty man who worked miracles, was delivered by our high priests into the hands of the Romans. He was taken out and crucified. We were so sure he was the one who had come to be the Redeemer of Israel. Furthermore, there have been some strange reports flying about. It is said that when the women went out to his tomb this morning they found that his body was gone! We hardly know what to make of it.”

When they had finished speaking, the stranger said to them, “O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!” Then, Luke tells us, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Later on, as they were thinking back over the events of that wonderful incident, they said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”

What was it that caused that wonderful, strange heartburn, that divine glow of anticipation which lit again the smoldering fires of faith in their

hearts and renewed their strength? (How we desire an experience like that!) Well, it was nothing more nor less than the exposition of the Old Testament in the power and clarity of the Holy Spirit. No incident in all the Bible catches up the specific purpose of the Old Testament more adequately than this story: “Beginning at Moses and the prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself,” {cf, Luke 24:27 RSV}. This is what the Old Testament is for. It is a book designed to prepare the heart for the reception of that which satisfies. This is what these disciples discovered on the road to Emmaus. The Old Testament is deliberately an incomplete book; it never was intended to be complete.

Dr. W. H. Griffith Thomas has suggested that if we were to approach the Old Testament as though we had never read it before, and take note of all the remarkable predictions of Someone who is coming, we would find that this series of predictions begins in the early chapters of Genesis, and as the text moves along, the predictive element grows in detail and degree of anticipation until, in the Prophets, it breaks out into glowing and marvelously flaming colors – all describing One who is coming. But when we finished our reading at Malachi, we would still not know who.

Thus we would observe that the Old Testament is a book of unfulfilled prophecy.

Then, if we read it through again, noticing this time all the strange sacrifices – that remarkable, mysterious stream of blood which begins in Genesis and flows in increasing volume all through the course of the book – thousands and multiplied thousands of animals whose blood was poured out in unending sacrifice, and a continual emphasis upon the need of sacrifice, we would close the book again at Malachi with a realization that here is a book of unexplained sacrifices, as well as unfulfilled prophecies.

Once again, if we read through the Old Testament, this time noticing the expressions of its prominent personages, the major leaders who appear in the pages of the Old Testament, we would see the longing they express for something more than life was offering them. For example, Abraham sets out to find the city whose builder and maker is God. Men are on a pilgrim journey all the way through the book. There is the continual crying out of thirsty souls, longing after something which has not yet been realized. We would close

the book again at Malachi with the realization that it was not only a book of unfulfilled prophecies and unexplained sacrifices, but also of unsatisfied longings. And we would find no answer to the prophecy or the sacrifice or the longing in the Old Testament.

But the minute you open the New Testament you read, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ...” He is the one who fulfills the prophecy, the one who explains the sacrifice, the one who satisfies the longing. Yet we cannot fully appreciate this until we have first been awakened by what the Old Testament has to say.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan puts it slightly different. He divides the Old Testament into three major divisions: “A sigh for a priest, a cry for a king, and a quest for a prophet.” The first five books, the books of Moses, are a sigh for a priest – an expressive plea for the ministry of one who can be a priest to stand between man and God. The books of the historical section are a cry for a king. They gather up in a unified declaration the longing of the human heart for a voice of authority. What Morgan calls the didactic books, that is, the teaching books of the Old Testament, including all the rest – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and the Major and Minor Prophets – are a quest for a prophet, a reaching out for one who can expertly analyze human life, comment on the passing scene, and anticipate what is to come, and thus can encourage our hearts. When we open the New Testament, we find all this fulfilled in one person – Jesus Christ – the Priest, the King, and the Prophet.

This indicates clearly for us the nature of the Old Testament. It is a book intended to prepare us for something. The letter to the Hebrews, of course, ties in closely with the Old Testament, and the first two verses catch this idea very beautifully. Do you remember how the writer begins?

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}

There you have the two Testaments side by side – the Old Testament: “In many and various ways God spoke of old,” or, as the King James Version puts it: “At sundry times and in diverse manners God spoke in times past” – and the New Testament: “In these last days he has spoken to us

by a Son.” The completion of the Old is found in the New.

The phrase the writer employs describing the Old Testament is very significant: “In many and various ways God spoke...” As we read it through, we can see how true this is; there are many ways in which God speaks:

Beginning with Genesis we have the simple but majestic account of the story of creation, of the fall of man, and of the flood – an account which has never been equaled in all the annals of literature for power and simplicity of expression. This is followed by the straightforward narrative of the lives of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We find the thunderings of the Law in Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Then the drama of the historical books, the sweet singing of the Psalms, and the exalted beauty of the language of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Theirs is a richness of expression which stands alone in all the realm of literature. Proverbs presents a practical, homespun wisdom; the Song of Solomon, Ruth, and Esther are books of delicate tenderness. There is the marvelous, mysterious language of Daniel and Ezekiel – the “wheels within wheels” and all the strange visions. We see how true it is that in “many and various ways” God spoke through the prophets. Yet it is all God speaking. And still it is not complete; there is nothing in the Old Testament which can stand complete and of itself. It is all intended as preparation.

When you come to the New Testament, all these many voices from the Old Testament merge into one voice, the voice of the Son of God. Remember that marvelous scene in the book of The Revelation in which John says he saw the Lamb and he heard a voice like the voice of many waters? That voice sounds out, catching up in itself all the rivulets and creeks and streams of a thousand rivers flowing together in one great symphony of sound – the voice of the Son!

That is what is expressed in these first verses of Hebrews. The Old Testament, in its incompleteness, is almost as though God spoke in syllables and phrases to us – wonderful phrases, rich syllables, but never quite connected, never quite complete. But in the New Testament, these syllables and phrases become one expressive discourse on the Son of God.

I remember that as a freshman in college I was introduced into an organization which perhaps you

have had occasion to join – the “Ancient Order of Siam.” We freshmen, with our dinky little green skullcaps making us look as ridiculous as possible, were led into a room where we were subjected to the authority of a number of sophomores, who stood around with paddles in their hands ready to enforce their commands. We were lined up in a row, and one fellow stood before us and ordered us to follow him in repeating what he said. He said, “Say these words: ‘Oh wah.’” So we said, “Oh wah.” Then he said, “Tah Goo.” And we said, “Tah Goo.” Then he said, “Siam.” So we said “Siam.” Then he said, “Say it all, faster.” So we repeated it over and over until eventually we caught on and found ourselves saying, “Oh, what a goose I am!” Then we were members of the “Order of Siam.”

In some far less ridiculous way, this is what the Old Testament is; it is a repeating in syllables, sometimes almost impossible to understand in themselves; but when merged together, the whole produces meaning, preparing us for that marvelous expression of the fullness that was given to us in God's Son.

Perhaps you are thinking, “Well, this may all be very good, but why bother with all this preparation? I can go directly to the New Testament and listen directly to the final voice of the Son. I don't need the Old Testament at all.” If that is your conclusion, you are making a very serious mistake.

Let me tell you why: You will soon discover that depth of preparation is an inescapable imperative to the thorough understanding of the New Testament. We cannot really grasp the New Testament without exposure to the preparation of the Old. I don't think that statement can be successfully challenged. It is true that there is much of the New Testament we can understand, but we will never lay hold of all God has for us in the New Testament until our heart has first been prepared by exposure to the Old.

Look at the statement of Abraham in that parable our Lord told in Luke 16 about the rich man and Lazarus, the beggar. The rich man died and went to Hades. There he besought Abraham to send Lazarus back to his five brothers to warn them of their fate unless they should repent. Abraham forbade Lazarus to go, and said, “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” The rich man pleaded that if someone would just go to them from the dead, and tell them the truth, then

they would believe. But Abraham replied, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." That is, even though someone should return from beyond the river of death with a report of all that he has seen and heard, and reflecting the wisdom he has learned – even though such a one should come back to teach us – if we haven't heard Moses and the prophets, we won't understand him. We won't know what he is saying. We won't be ready to receive or believe him. It is simply true that, in this, as well as in many other relationships of life, we cannot short-circuit the processes of learning.

Every successful process requires an adequate preparation. Why else does a farmer take all the trouble to plow and harrow his field and get it all ready for planting? Why doesn't he just take the seed out and sprinkle it over the hard and dry ground, hoping that it will grow? Because every farmer knows that though the seed is the most important single item in raising a crop, yet it will never take root unless there has been adequate preparation of the ground.

What makes a boy court a girl – spend all his hours thinking about her, buy her flowers and candy? Because he knows that if he is really serious, when the time comes to pop the question and ask her to be his wife, all that preparatory time will prove to have been most valuable indeed. She may say, "Oh, this is so sudden!" But she never really means it, for there has been a long time of preparation.

Why do schoolteachers always start with the ABC's and 123's? Why don't they plunge right in and introduce the students to Shakespeare and Einstein? Obviously, they cannot do it that way; knowledge does not come that way.

We can be exposed to information and we may grasp little bits here and there, but, unless there has been adequate preparation, all the vast amount of available knowledge flows over us and leaves us unchanged.

Paul says in Galatians 3, "The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ." I am quite confident that something will be forever lacking in our lives if we try to appropriate Jesus Christ fully without living for a while with the Ten Commandments. We will never be able to lay hold of all that is in him unless, like Paul, we have wrestled with the demands of a rigid, unyielding law which makes

us say with him, "Oh, wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" {cf, Rom 7:24}.

I remember having read the book of Romans for years, especially Chapters 6, 7, and 8, with all their great delivering truth. I even taught it. But I never grasped with real understanding the truth it contains, I never let its mighty, liberating power come through to my own heart and experience until I had lived for a while out in the wilderness on the back side of the desert with the children of Israel, and had felt the burning desert heat – the barren, fruitless, defeated life they experienced. When I had been there too, and had seen how God delivered them, then I was able for the first time to understand what God is trying to tell us in Romans 6, 7, and 8. Much of the reason we have difficulty understanding the New Testament is that we ignore and lay aside the Old Testament. So our hearts approach the New Testament inadequately prepared to receive the seed of the Word.

There is no book in all the New Testament which asks the same deep, soul-searching questions you find in the Old Testament – questions which are forever recurring in the hearts of men. There is no place in the New Testament where you find gathered up in brief phrases the expression of the deep, deep searchings of mind and heart as we confront the problems of injustice and the twists of fate in the world today. There is no book like the book of Psalms to put in graphic, precise terms those troublesome attitudes we find so frequently bothering us in our Christian experience. It is only there we find these attitudes expressed, brought out and put into words so we can say, "That's exactly how I feel," and then proceed to find the answer for the problem as well.

The Old Testament is an *experience* book, designed to portray to us graphically what we are, in order to make us ready to listen to what the Holy Spirit has to say to us in the New Testament. Is there a greater text in all the Bible to prepare your heart for Christmastime than some of Isaiah's mighty declarations?

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. {Isa 9:6 KJV}

Or,

Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [God with us]. {Isa 7:14b KJV}

These are some of the richest expressions of Christmas hope – and how poverty-stricken we would be without them! Yet, this is but a small segment of the marvelous, preparatory truth God has invested in the Old Testament, to make the New Testament rich and glowing in its expression to us.

Some time ago, as two friends and I were driving through San Bernardino, my mind went back to a story Dr. H. A. Ironside told in my presence on a number of occasions. In the early years of his ministry, while he was still an officer in the Salvation Army, he was holding meetings in a large hall in that city, and a great number of people were coming every night to hear him teach. One night he noticed an alert young man sitting in the rear, leaning forward and avidly listening to everything. He returned night after night. Dr. Ironside wanted to get acquainted with him. He tried to catch him before he left the building, but each time the meeting was dismissed, the young man would leave immediately. So he never had a chance to meet him.

One night the young man came in a little late, and the only two seats left in the auditorium were right in the front row. He came down the aisle rather self-consciously looking around for a seat, and when he found there were no others, he slipped into one of the seats in the front row. Ironside said to himself, "Ha, I've got you now. You won't be able to get away tonight." Sure enough, once again when the meeting was over, the young man turned to go, but the aisle was full, and he was delayed. Ironside stepped forward, tapped him on the shoulder and said, "I beg your pardon. Would you mind if we just sit down here and talk? I would like to know a little bit about you." The young man looked as though he did mind, but he was polite enough to say he didn't.

They sat down and Ironside said, "Tell me about yourself. Are you a Christian?" The young man looked at him and said, "Well, no, I don't think I could say that I am a Christian." "Well," said Ironside, "what are you?" The young man said, "I really can't tell you. There was a time when I think I would have called myself an atheist. But of late, I

have been going through a remarkable revolution in my thinking. I have been doing some reading, and I just don't think I could say that anymore. I probably would be called an agnostic."

Ironside said, "Well, that is a little progress. You have made a step up in the right direction anyway. Tell me, what is it that has produced this change in you?" He was hoping the young man would say that it was his brilliant preaching! Instead, the young man pointed to a man sitting a few seats away and said, "It is the change in that man right there."

He pointed to a man by the name of Al Oakley, who had been part owner of a popular saloon in San Bernardino. Al had gotten to be his own best customer and had become nothing but a drunkard. He had to quit the business, and he ended up roaming the streets, a poor outcast, just a common drunk. This young man said, "I have known Al Oakley for a number of years, and I know he hasn't any more backbone than a jellyfish. He tried to quit drinking several different times, but was never able to. But something has happened to him."

What had happened was that he had been converted in a Salvation Army jail service. The conversion was a real one; the man's life had been totally changed. This young man said, "I don't know what has happened to him. It is remarkable. Something has changed him, and I am at a loss to explain it. It has made me wonder if perhaps there isn't something to this 'Christian' business after all."

He said, "You know, I have been reading the Bible lately, and I find that I can't get anything at all out of the New Testament. But these last few days I have been reading the book of Isaiah. Oh, can't he sling the language, though? I have always been an admirer of oratory, and I think Isaiah spouts the most remarkable, marvelous oratory and eloquence I have ever read. You know, if I could be a Christian by believing Isaiah, I think I might be one."

Ironside realized that was his cue, so he took his Bible and said to the young man, "I would like to read you a chapter from the book of Isaiah – just a short one. It is about an unnamed man, but when I finish I want you to give me his name."

The young man said, "I could never do that. I am not at all well acquainted with the Bible."

Ironside said, "I don't think you will have any problem." He turned to the 53rd Chapter of Isaiah and began to read:

**Who has believed what we have heard?
And to whom has the arm of the Lord been
revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young
plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or comeliness that we
should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men;
a man of sorrows, and acquainted with
grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him
not.
Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that made
us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. {Isa 53:1-6 RSV}**

All the way through that chapter he read. When he finished he said, "Now, tell me, who am I reading about?" The young man said, "Let me read it myself." He took the book and began to read rapidly through the whole chapter. Then he suddenly dropped the book back in Ironside's hands, and out the door he went. He didn't say a word; he told Ironside afterward that he was afraid he might break down. Ironside didn't know what to do, so he simply prayed for the young man.

The next night he looked for him, but he was not there. The second night he looked for him, but again he wasn't there. On the third night he came in, and this time he walked right up the aisle with a different expression on his face. Ironside knew something had happened. The young man sat down in one of the front seats. When a time of testimony was called for, he stood and he began to tell his story. He said,

"I was one of the young men hired by the British government to go to Palestine to survey for the railroad from Joppa to Jerusalem. I was raised in a family in which my father

and mother were complete unbelievers; they had no faith in the Christian message at all. I read all the critics and was convinced there was absolutely nothing to this 'Christian' business. But while I was in Palestine many things made it sound as though the Bible were true. This angered me. I was in a continual state of confusion and rebellion. Finally we got to Jerusalem. I joined a tourist group one day as they went out to visit Gordon's Calvary [the site outside the Damascus Gate where Gen. Charles Gordon felt he had found Golgotha, the skull-shaped hill with the garden tomb nearby]. I went up there with this group. We climbed to the top, and while we were there, the guide explained that this was the place where the Christian faith began. But as I stood on that spot, it came home to me that this was the spot where what I regarded as the Christian deception began. It made me so angry I began to curse and blaspheme. The people ran in terror down the slope, afraid that God was going to strike me dead for blasphemy in such a sacred spot."

At this point, the young man could hardly maintain his composure. He said,

"You know, friends, these last few nights I have learned that the One I cursed on Calvary was the One who was wounded for my transgressions, and with whose stripes I am healed!"

It took that Old Testament prophecy to make the young man's heart ready. This beautifully captures the purpose of the Old Testament. It is to set our hearts aflame, to give us a divine heartburn, an anticipatory glance which causes us to look to the Christ we find in the New Testament, with a heart prepared to find him as the Savior who supplies all we need.

Prayer:

Our Holy Father, we thank you for this marvelous book, coming to us down through the centuries, filled with glimpses of Jesus Christ, our Lord. We pray you will forgive us for the attitude many of us have held toward the Old Testament – neglecting it, leaving it to lie unopened, un-

read. Lord, teach us to search its pages, to enter into its glories, to learn there the deep expressions of the human heart in its need and helplessness, that we may be ready to receive the glorious good news of the New Testament. Make it become a living book, a fascinating book, guiding and teaching and strengthening us to become mature in Jesus Christ. our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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