

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. 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 universe, 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

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And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
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:

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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

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need to understand what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 2:7 as “a secret and hidden 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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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. Abra-

ham 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, unread. 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.

God has Spoken in These Last Days

by: Ray C. Stedman

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 to-

day, 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 presented 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.

Five Steps to Maturity

by Ray C. Stedman

The purpose of the revelation God has given us is to make us grow up in Christ. It finds the fulfillment of its function in you and me. If it is not accomplishing this, then it was wasted as far as we are concerned. Its whole purpose is to keep us from “being any longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” {cf, Eph 4:14} which blows, and instead to make us stable, mature, able, effective instruments of the grace of God – to make us grow to spiritual maturity so that we might be bodies wholly filled and flooded with God himself. A magnificent statement of what Scripture is for is found in Paul's prayer in the third chapter of Ephesians, Verses 14-19:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. {Eph 3:14-19 RSV}

We have seen in the previous two messages that the Old Testament's function in this is preparation, and the New Testament's function is realization. It is impossible to enter fully into the realization until you have entered adequately into the preparation. Right here is where many, many Christians fail. They try to get everything out of the New Testament and never – or seldom – go to the Old Testament. You simply cannot appropriate all that is in the New Testament without the prepara-

tion of the heart which comes from the Old Testament. So we desperately need both of these mighty revelations of God.

Now we will return to the Old Testament and see how each of its divisions contributes to this work of preparing our hearts to receive and to realize the fullness that is available to us in Jesus Christ.

The first division consists of the first five books of the Old Testament – books with which we are familiar – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They are called the *Pentateuch* in Latin, which simply means “five books” – the five books of Moses.

How many of us have begun to read these books?

How many of us have finished them?

Usually we start off very well in Genesis and move on into Exodus, don't we? But about in Leviticus – where we get into all the strange requirements of the Law – we bog down, and we never quite get through into Numbers and Deuteronomy, much less into Joshua. This is the story of so many of us.

It reminds me of a cartoon I saw recently. A woman is walking by a movie theater, on the marquee of which is an advertisement for the film *The Ten Commandments*. She looks up at it and says, “Oh, yes, I've seen the picture, but I haven't read the book.” Most of us fall into that category. We have seen a great many of the motion pictures Hollywood gives us, but too seldom have we ever read the books.

Why do we bog down? It isn't because the Pentateuch isn't instructive or helpful. In many ways it is the most helpful part of the Bible. My own Christian life has been more greatly strengthened by reading the Pentateuch than perhaps any

other portion of Scripture. Why do we bog down in it? Largely because we are reading without vision. We don't know why we are reading it. We don't know what to expect from it. We don't know what to look for. We read the text as it appears – a simple narrative which sometimes is interesting and sometimes gets very complex and complicated – without realizing why it says what it says or what it is driving at. We have very little motivation to probe into it and to find out the marvelous secrets which are there. And that is the purpose of this series of studies – to climb up on a mountaintop, look out over the whole surface of the land and get a bird's-eye view, so that we might see what we are going to run into, and why. We want to do that now with this section – the Pentateuch.

We begin with **Genesis**. The name means *beginnings*, and this is certainly the book of beginnings. It is the story of the beginning of our universe, the beginning of the human race, the beginning of sin, the beginning of civilization, and it is a fascinating record of the origins of the physical things we find in such abundance around about us.

The book opens with an awareness of the greatest material fact in all of human life, a fact we are all subconsciously aware of every moment of our life – the fact that we are living in a universe. There isn't a moment any one of us forgets this. We are aware that we don't live life all alone. We are living on a planet, shared with millions of other human beings like ourselves. And if we know anything at all about modern science, we are aware that our planet is part of a solar system. In some strange, mysterious way, this whole mass of earth upon which we are seated is winding its way on a prearranged path about the sun, circling continuously, precisely on schedule. We are also told by the astronomers that our whole solar system itself – the sun with all its planets – is making its way through a great whirling body of stars called a galaxy – a vast, almost incredibly immense system of stars, some three hundred thousand light-years across. And this galaxy is itself moving at incredible speed through the vastness of space in conjunction with millions and, some astronomers say, even billions of other galaxies like ours. Whenever we look up into the night sky and see the glory of the stars, an awesomeness settles upon our spirit, and we become very much aware we live in a universe.

The Bible opens with that majestic, amazing recognition – man is part of a universe (Gen. 1:1):

**In the beginning God created the heavens [in all their vastness] and the earth.
{Gen 1:1 RSV}**

What a strange conjunction – to put all the heavens in one lump and our tiny planet Earth in the other! Then the book moves right on to tell us about man – insignificant man – this tiny speck of life living on a minor planet in the midst of this unthinkably vast universe. What a strange conjunction! But this brings us face to face with what in many ways is the greatest mystery of our life. David catches it up beautifully in the eighth Psalm. Probably one beautiful summer night he looked up into the glowing heavens above and sang (Verses 3-4):

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of
thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast
established,
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care
for him? {Psa 8:3-4 RSV}**

The God who made it all should visit him? Then, by inspiration, David answers his own question (Psa. 8:6):

**Thou hast given him dominion over the
works of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet
{Psa 8:6 RSV}**

Thus the Bible begins with the confrontation of the greatest mystery we come up against – the mystery of man in relationship to his universe. Amazingly enough, this is the very theme of science today. It is the theme which has captured the attention of more thinking people the world over than ever before in human history: What is the place of man in relationship to his universe?

Here is where the Bible begins. And it goes on to tell us man is a strange and remarkable creature who was made to be the expression of God's love, the instrument of God, the dwelling place of the Almighty. Man is seen in the opening chapters of Genesis in a marvelous faith-love relationship with God – in communion with him. The verse in

Genesis that says God walked in the garden “in the cool of the day” (3:8), rightly translated, should say God walked in the garden “in the spirit of the day,” i.e., in a spirit of understanding with man – the impartation of God's life in communion. Here we get just a brief glimpse of God's intention for man.

Immediately this is shattered by the story of the fall. Beginning in the third chapter of Genesis, we get the record of the tragedy of unbelief. The Bible begins to confront us immediately with the awful error of faith in the wrong idea – the terrible destruction which can come to human life when man in his ignorance and his blindness begins to put faith in error. It shows us that man is made to be a creature of faith. People say, “I can't believe.” But that is the one thing they can do. It is the one thing human beings are made to do. We cannot help but believe. The question is, “*What* do we believe?”

So here is the story of man in his failure and fall. It is followed immediately by the story of the failure of the first creation and its eventual destruction in the flood.

The rest of Genesis is a picture drawn for us by God of man in his need. It is the story of the lives of four men. You know them well – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

We can think of them as four representative types of personality. One of them is like you. I know whom I am like – Jacob. Jacob fits me to a “T”.

The stories of these men, despite the marvelous lessons of spiritual victory which are involved, are basically given to show us the desperate need in each one's life.

- Abraham's story is the story of the need for a supplier. Here was a man who was always needing somebody to come and deliver something to him that he lacked. He was always short. The modern saying is: “A dime short and an hour late.” That is the story of Abraham's life. He was always in need. It is the story of a man whose need was continually being supplied by God.
- Isaac was a man who had another kind of need. He never ran short. There is no record of a famine in Isaac's life. But he was in need of a stimulator. He loved to just sit. He needed somebody to get him going. So God had to prod him repeatedly to get him moving into the

place God wanted him to be. All of us consistently need this kind of stimulation.

- Jacob was a man who was in continual need of a bodyguard, a protector. He was always getting himself into a mess, into difficulty. So all life long he needed somebody to come and get him out of the trouble he got himself into.
- Then we have the marvelous story of Joseph. How different he was from Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob! What an admirable man in many ways! And yet the story of Joseph's life is the story of need – the need of a deliverer. He was always needing to be delivered from situations which were not his own fault, or into which he was placed without any failure on his own part. But he needed to be brought out of them. And his is the story of how God continually delivered him. It ends with the words in which the book of Genesis ends – “a coffin in Egypt.” In the coffin were the bones of Joseph. His last need was to have his body delivered from Egypt and taken up to the Promised Land.

So the whole story of Genesis is a message of the need of man.

Then we come to **Exodus**, which is the story of God's response to man's need. It is the marvelous lesson of redemption. The whole book gathers around three major incidents: the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The first two of these, the Passover and the crossing of the sea, mark for us the forgiveness and the freedom which God gives – in order to teach us that freedom and forgiveness are wholly God's activity. Man can have no part in either of them.

The first part of the book is the story of how God began to move to set his people free. He arranged the marvelous encounters of Moses with Pharaoh and also the great miracles culminating in the passing over of the angel of death through the land while protecting his people from judgment, as celebrated in the Passover feast. All this is a picture of God at work, setting his people free. They did nothing. They could do nothing. There was nothing for them to do. They could not add to it. They could only receive it.

The crossing of the Red Sea is the story of setting the people free from bondage. They were brought into a new relationship as they left Egypt. They came out of the land of the shadow of death, passed through the waters safely, and emerged on the other side no longer merely a mob of people but now, for the first time, a nation under God.

What did they run into on the other side of the Red Sea? Sinai and the giving of the Law. This is simply to indicate that when man is redeemed – when he is set free, when he is brought out of the slavery of the bondage of sin, passing by the death of Another into liberty from Egypt – he comes under the control of Another. The giving of the Law is but the expression of the Lordship of God. The message of Exodus is that a new relationship is begun, a new ownership entered into. In First Corinthians 6, Paul expresses the fundamental message of this book in brief form (Verses 19b-20a): “You are not your own; you were bought with a price.”

Next we come to **Leviticus** – and here is where we are likely to bog down. Leviticus is a book of instruction designed to make all that God is available to man, so that all that man is may be available to God. Its theme is access to God. It begins with the story of the Tabernacle, that wonderful building where God dwelt. If we could have climbed to a mountaintop and looked out over the wilderness area where the twelve tribes of Israel were encamped, it would have been a strange and wonderful sight to see this vast assemblage spread out on the plains in perfect order and symmetry, each of the twelve tribes in their particular place. As we walked down the mountain and passed into the camp, we would have come through all the thousands of Israelites until we came to the outer court of the Tabernacle.

Then, going through the great open gate, we would have passed the altar of sacrifice and the brazen laver, and would have come to the door of the Tabernacle itself. Moving through the mysterious and marvelous outer veil, we would have come into the Holy Place, where were the showbread, the altar of incense, and the great golden candelabra. Beyond stood the inner veil, and behind that – if we dared to enter – was the Holy of Holies. The only article in that room was the Ark of the Covenant. That mysterious vehicle was the dwelling place of God, with the mercy seat above it and the two

cherubim with their wings covering it. There too, in a marvelous way, shone the Shekinah light of God's glory. It was a place of fearsomeness. The only one who dared to enter was the high priest – and then only once a year with the blood of the goat of atonement, in order to make atonement for the sins of all the people. All this is a picture of God's dwelling in the midst of his people, showing how they could have fellowship with him.

The book of Leviticus is designed to teach us three major principles:

1. The first is representation. That is, we never would have been permitted into the Holy of Holies, had we been part of Israel. Only the high priest could go in. But when he did, he represented the whole nation. By that representation, the nation began to learn the wonderful principle of appropriating the value of another's work. After all, this is exactly what we are asked to do, isn't it? We are asked to believe Christ died for us, and that we died with him. And all of our victory rests upon our ability to appropriate the work of Another who is our representative. God began to teach this to the world in Leviticus.
2. The second great principle or truth God began to teach was his adequacy. The book opens with the institution of five offerings, each one speaking of Jesus Christ in his death for us, each one showing how a basic need of human life is fully met already in what Christ has done, and all of them together showing us that there is nothing we will ever run into which hasn't already been taken care of. Therefore it is absolute unbelief to come to God and start asking him to do something for us which he hasn't already done. What is necessary is not to plead with him to do something new, but for us to start believing and appropriating what he has already done.
3. The third great truth God began to teach was that all of the representation and all of the adequacy become expressive in our life, become actual in terms of our experience, by the simple act of obedience, of faith in action – faith moving, acting upon what has been done. Leviticus is that book of instruction. If you read it in conjunction with the book of He-

brews, it is one of the most illuminating studies in all of the Bible.

Then we come to **Numbers**, the book of the wilderness of failure. It begins at Kadesh-barnea, right at the edge of the Promised Land. When we get to the end of the book, we are back at Kadesh-barnea again. No progress whatsoever. In between are forty years of wandering in a desert. God's intention for the Hebrews was that they spend forty days between the edge of Egypt and the border of the Land; however, because of unbelief they wandered for forty years – forty years of murmuring, barrenness, loneliness, heat, blistering sand, and of harking back to the “joys” they thought they had known in Egypt and wanting to be back there – barrenness and defeat.

And the amazing thing is that, in spite of all the wonderful instruction they had in Leviticus, and the adequate provision already given to them entirely by God in order that they might enjoy his presence among them, when we read Numbers we see nothing but absolute failure because of the ignorance of the people. This is almost unbelievable!

I can never understand it, but I continually encounter this phenomenon, not only in others but in my own experience. How is it that people can read the Bible for years, go to a Bible school, attend a seminary perhaps, attend a Bible church, give themselves to the teaching, go through various courses, listen to the best of Bible expositors, and yet – sometimes after years of this kind of clear, unequivocal instruction in the truth – remain hopelessly helpless when it comes to walking in victory, as if they hadn't learned anything at all?

I recently talked with a woman who told me that she had sat under a string of great Bible teachers. She had been studying her Bible for years and years. She could list all types of things she knew – could easily pass an examination in Bible knowledge which would stump many Bible institute students. But she had come to me in complete defeat. Her faith was absolutely gone. Her family was falling apart, and her faith had instantly vanished when the pressure began to come upon her. Why? Because there had been no appropriation of all she had learned. She had not acted upon it at all.

This is the story of Numbers. It is the record of the failure of God's people to act on what God had told them. And, as a result, it is the record of their wandering in the wilderness – and also the

record of God's fatherly care over them in love despite their human failure, taking care of them despite the grieving of his heart over them.

Finally we come to **Deuteronomy**. The name means “second law.” In Greek, *deuter* means “second,” and *nomas* means “law” – the Second Law. That is an odd name, isn't it? Why was the Law given again? For, as we read the book, we discover that it is indeed a second setting forth of the Law. It begins with a marvelous message by Moses, reviewing all of God's love and blessings to the people. The major part of the book is a resumé of the Law. Then it closes with a wonderful message from Moses, which is a revelation of the marvelous blessings that are in store. But why the Law again?

Well, remember that Paul tells us the Law has a purpose in our lives. In Galatians 3, he says the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. It is when the Law says “thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery,” etc., that we become aware for the first time of the hungering to do these things – and of our rebellious attitude toward anyone who says, “No, you can't.” It is then that we become aware that we not only can't do these things, but that we really don't want to. And that, in turn, makes us cry out in desperation for the Savior, for the Redeemer. So the Law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. This is really the message of the first two chapters of Romans also.

Ah, but the Law comes in again in Chapter 7 of Romans. Why the second time? Well, the first time was to teach us we are sinful. The second time is to teach us we are helpless. Despite the fact that we have a redeemed nature and we want then to do the will of God, we still can't do it. We were never intended to do anything on our own. We are totally, absolutely helpless. Here, you see, is what God accomplished in the book of Deuteronomy. For forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness, until at last they learned they could do nothing till the old generation died. When the new generation came to be, God reminded them of what he had done, and he gave them the Law again. And instead of responding as they did at Mount Sinai – “All that the Lord has said, we will do” – this time the response of the people was, “We don't have, of ourselves, what it takes to do this.” They were then ready to be led into the land by Joshua. *Joshua* is

the Hebrew name of Jesus. *Jesus* is the Greek form.

When we come to the end of the book of Deuteronomy, we find that at last God has prepared his people for that which he wanted to give all along. The whole five books (Pentateuch) of Moses are to bring the people to the edge of the Land. Moses could not take them in. Moses represents the Law. As Paul says in Romans 8:3, "What the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, God has done in sending his own Son [Jesus (Joshua)], God condemned sin in the flesh" and led them into the Land.

You can see this in just two brief passages from Deuteronomy: Beginning in Chapter 29, Moses exhorts the people to heed the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded him to make with them. Then in Chapter 30, Verses 19 and 20, he closes with these words:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you {Deut 30:19-20a}

Or, as the King James Version has it, "for he is thy life." Does that sound familiar to you? That is the New Covenant, isn't it? "For Christ is our life," {cf, Col 3:4 KJV}.

and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. {Deut 30:20b RSV}

And when you come to the end of the book, you find a marvelous setting forth in beautiful poetry of what God will do with a heart which is ready to rest in the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. Verse 29 of Chapter 33:

**Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,
a people saved by the Lord,
the shield of your help,
and the sword of your triumph!
Your enemies shall come fawning to you;
and you shall tread upon their high
places." {Deut 33:29 RSV}**

So the book of Deuteronomy closes with the people ready for Joshua.

That is the Pentateuch. These five books give us the pattern of God's program. This pattern is stamped upon almost every page of the Bible. You will find these same five steps over and over again throughout the Scriptures:

- The book of Psalms is divided into five divisions, which agree exactly with these steps.
- The five offerings Israel had to make agree exactly with these five steps.
- The five great feasts which Israel celebrated agree with these steps.
- And each of the Testaments is divided into five sections following this pattern -- Old and New Testaments alike.

Someone has even suggested that perhaps God, wanting us to remember this, gave us five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot. For the number 5 is stamped throughout the Scriptures, and each time it is a repetition of this pattern that God will follow. It is the pattern God follows in our lives:

- First, an awareness of our need;
- Second, a picture of God's activity in moving to meet that need – his response in redemption;
- Third, the instruction in how to worship, how to approach God;
- Fourth, always inevitably failure on our part to do so; and,
- Fifth, culminating at last in the arrival at the place where self-effort ends and the Law strikes again to crush us in humiliation and helplessness, until we say, "Lord, on my own I can't do a thing." And God says, "Good, that is right where I have been wanting to bring you. Now I will begin to move

through you to do it in you, and thus to accomplish it all.”

This is the Pentateuch. You will never know the Bible until you know the Pentateuch.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this look at your marvelous book and the wonders of it. We pray that we grow in understanding of it and become able workmen of your Word, in Christ's name, Amen.

The Message of History

by Ray C. Stedman

Our survey of the Bible brings us now to the historical books of the Old Testament. If you are not reading these books as we go along, you are missing tremendous truth which, if you grasp it, will deliver you from many weaknesses and failures that you may find present in your life right now. That is the purpose of truth – to set us free. In this survey so far, we have seen the great purpose of all revelation, of the book that God has given us, and of the Holy Spirit, in whose power we understand and enter into this truth. All of this has been given to us through the intermediacy of about forty authors, writing over a span of some sixteen hundred years, and preserved at the cost of blood, sweat and tears in order that we – you and I – might be brought to maturity in Jesus Christ. It took all of that to do it.

Maturity is the reflection, in my life and yours, of the image and character of Jesus Christ – that is, as Paul prayed in Ephesians, that we may be bodies filled and flooded with God himself, and therefore, as Paul put it in Philippians, shining as lights in the midst of a generation of crooks and perverts. This is the purpose of revelation – to mature us, to bring us to full-grown stature in Jesus Christ, so that we are no longer children, tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine that blows, and led into all kinds of false ideas; but instead, we walk straight and sure down the path of truth, with our heads held high as men, women, sons, and daughters of God who know where they are going, where they have come from, and why they are here.

We have seen that the particular part the Old Testament contributes to this is preparation, while the part the New Testament contributes is realization. You cannot realize what God has for you without the preparation of heart which the Old Testament provides. I am absolutely convinced of this. I am positive that those Christians who be-

lieve they can get all of their spiritual strength and help out of the New Testament, at the price of neglecting the Old, will discover that, though they may assimilate the truth of the New Testament in the head, it will never reach the heart. The mind may be full of the doctrinal content of the New Testament, but the life remains utterly untransformed. This is because there has not been adequate preparation for it by the assimilation of Old Testament truth.

In our last study we began to see, in our survey, how each of the Old Testament's divisions contributes to this work of preparation. We looked at the first five books, the Pentateuch – the five books of Moses – which we saw were God's pattern of working in the human life. Over and over again, in the Scriptures and in life, you will find repeated the pattern which the Pentateuch sets forth. Do you remember what it is?

- Genesis is the book which constantly stresses the deep-seated need of human life – man in his helplessness, in his weakness, in his overwhelming need for God.
- Exodus follows as the book of redemption, where God lays hold of us. The key to this book is ownership. We become his – as Paul expresses it: “You are not your own; you were bought with a price,” {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}.
- Leviticus is the book of access to God, of instruction in how to worship. Worship is nothing more than laying hold of God. We don't worship when we simply bow our heads and let some kind of pious thoughts run vagrantly through our minds. We worship when we lay hold of what God is. Though it may seem dry

reading, when we begin to analyze it, Leviticus opens up as a great book which gives us tremendous lessons in the life of worship.

- Numbers is the book of weakness and failure, of wandering in the wilderness. The wilderness is the experience of attempting to carry out the worship of Leviticus in the strength of the flesh, the effort of the natural heart. The result is wandering.
- Deuteronomy comes in as the second giving of the Law, which prepares us to recognize our helplessness and makes us ready for entering the Land of Promise, ready for victory.

This brings us to the historical books – Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. We will see now how these books contribute to the preparatory work of the Old Testament. If the Pentateuch is the section which gives us the pattern of God's working, then the historical books give us the perils which confront us when we try to walk in the life of faith. This is their purpose.

If you stop to think about it a minute, this is what history is for, isn't it? History is the story of man. I know there are those who say that history is "his story," meaning Christ's story; but that is true only in a secondary sense. Christ is in history; however, he is behind the scenes.

I love those words of James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold
wrong forever on the throne,
But God is standing in the shadows
keeping watch above his own.

That is the relationship of God to history. He is behind the scenes. But history primarily is the story of man's cycle of failure, a continual sequence of the rise and fall of one empire after another – one civilization after another struggling through defeat or bondage to the place of victory and triumph and material blessing and prosperity, and to a wide extension of the empire. But then forces begin to eat away and cause the empire or nation to deteriorate and dissolve and crumble and at last collapse. If you read any great historian, such as Arnold Toynbee, you find he points out cycle after cycle of failure in history.

In these historical books of the Bible we find all of the lessons which we can read in secular history – condensed, as it were. These books trace the history of one nation, a peculiar nation, a nation with a special ministry – a representative nation, if you like. Though it is good to read secular history – I enjoy reading it myself – nevertheless, if you want to know what history can teach you, you will find it all condensed in these historical books of the Old Testament. Here we have history visualized in one nation: Israel. What happens to them is a picture of all the perils which will ever oppress men anywhere. But more than that, the picture is a special illustration of the perils and pressures and problems which come upon the believer, the Christian, as he attempts to walk the life of faith. It is very important to know your enemies. Do you know who they are, and do you know in what form they come to you? It would simply be absurd to send a submarine against an army entrenched in the mountains, wouldn't it? Well, it is equally absurd for a Christian to try to employ any randomly chosen spiritual weapon against one of the powers of darkness for which that weapon is not designed. We must know our enemies. This is where these historical books become of great value to us. They present to us the perils which beset the life of faith, and the means of victory over them.

The first of the historical books is **Joshua**. It begins with a story of victory – the entrance of Israel into the Land of Promise, the place where God intended them to be all along when he brought them out of Egypt. Who of us has not yet discovered that the Christian life is not only a question of being brought out of, but of entering into, as well? The problem is that many of us are quite content to be brought out of Egypt – the world and all its ways – but we never quite get around to entering into the Land. We have faith enough to be brought out of Egypt, but somewhere we falter and fail to lay hold of that faith which takes us over the Jordan and into the Land of Promise. But, in the book of Joshua, Israel is now entering into the Land. This book is a story of great triumph and victory. It is a book which traces for us the experience of conquest.

What was the first enemy which faced Israel as they came across the Jordan River? It was the imposing city of Jericho, with its tremendous walls – about one hundred feet high and thirty feet thick – a

super-fortress of a city, an impregnable barrier. It might have been the first city any of them had ever encountered. As they looked at it, they saw their own feebleness and that of their weapons, and they said, "How can we ever take a walled city like this?"

Have you ever felt like that? Has there been anything in your life which has seemed to you to be an insuperable obstacle – something you have struggled with, and it has mocked you and baffled you and defeated you for years – something you have seen looming there in all its invincibility, and nothing you are able to do seems to have any effect upon it? Well, that is your Jericho.

What did God do? It is perhaps the most amazing story in all literature. I am not a military man, but I am sure that no military man in his right mind would ever devise a strategy like this: Set his troops to marching silently around a walled city once a day for six days; on the seventh day, have them go around seven times, with seven trumpets blowing; then, after the seventh time, have the people shout – and the wall will collapse! But many a Christian has discovered, where he begins to lay hold of the truth of the indwelling life of Jesus Christ – which is what entering into the land signifies – that many obstacles which once were a problem suddenly disappear. They simply aren't there. Their walls have totally collapsed. There is immediate victory. Jericho is a picture of the world in its assault upon the Christian, and of the victory over the world which is available in Jesus Christ.

The Jericho story is followed immediately by the story of Ai. Ai was an insignificant little town. Nobody thought anything of it. It just a little village, a little 'wide spot in the road.' Joshua reasoned, "Why waste an entire army on a little place like that?" So he dispatched only a few men. But they came back defeated. Joshua went before the Lord and found that there was sin in the camp. When that was taken care of, then there was victory over Ai. Ai is a picture of the flesh – its subtlety, its seeming insignificance. We think we can control our tempers and our lusts and our evil thoughts if we just set our minds to it. But we discover it isn't that easy.

Ai is followed by the battle of Gibeon, the story of deceit. Joshua and all the hosts of Israel were deceived by a handful of Gibeonites, who disguised themselves in old clothes and took moldy bread and pretended to have come from a long way off. They

made a pact with Joshua that he would protect them. Then the Israelites discovered that the Gibeonites were from the city right over the next hill! This represents the wiles and the deceitfulness of Satan.

So if you cannot find the perils of your life in the book of Joshua, there is something seriously wrong. They are all there. But the kernel of the book is set forth for us in Chapter 13, Verse 1. Each of these historical books has a peculiar peril all its own which it is designed to describe for us. But not only does it set forth the peril, but right along with it is the manifestation of at least one individual who is given victory over that peril. In the book of Joshua it is the man Joshua himself. Here is his peril:

Now Joshua was old and advanced in years; and the Lord said to him, "You are old and advanced in years, and there remains yet very much land to be possessed." {Josh 13:1 RSV}

This was the problem with Joshua. This book is a picture of the believer who understands Christ's indwelling life. Once that concept is internalized, any believer can immediately experience victory over Satan. It is a glorious and marvelous experience. But somewhere along the line there is an incomplete victory. We decide to settle down. We are enjoying life. It is so much better than it ever was before. So we say, "Why go on any further? I know that there are areas of my life which I have not yet conquered in the name of Christ; but I have conquered so much, Lord. Let me just enjoy this awhile." The peril here is the temptation to premature contentment, to an incomplete conquest, to a readiness to settle down where we are and stop the pilgrim march.

Have you experienced this? It is always the first attack of the enemy in times of victory and conquest. But Jesus said,

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." {Matt 5:6 RSV}

This hunger and thirst must mark all our life. We are never to get over it. Then we are always on the march. At the close of the book you find Joshua saying to the people of Israel, "There is very much land yet to be possessed," and he urges

them to do it. He warns them about some of the attitudes which were already beginning to possess them. Then he says to them, in Chapter 24, Verse 15:

**“choose this day whom you will serve.” ...
“but as for me and my house, we will serve
the Lord.” {Josh 24:15 RSV}**

There was never a letdown in Joshua's life, never a willingness to stop the march. He was on the march until the day of his death. He never quit. This is the shining of grace, the breaking through of light into darkness, in the book of Joshua.

Now we come to the books of **Judges** and **Ruth**. We will take them together, because the events of Ruth are contemporary with the first half of Judges. The book of Joshua covers a period of about twenty-five years. Judges covers a period of about three hundred years. The book of Judges is the story of a continually repeated cycle of defeat – of decline, discipline, and then deliverance. Over and over again God sent judges to the people of Israel to deliver them from persecution and bondage into which they had fallen and under which they suffered for many weary, painful years.

The book begins with the story of Othniel, the first judge God sent, and ends with the familiar story of Samson, the last judge. There were seven judges altogether whom God used to deliver the people. But over and over again, no sooner had he set the people back on their feet than they began again to fail.

Now, why did they fail? What is the peril of Judges? You will find it stated in Chapter 2, Verses 11-13:

**And the people of Israel did what was
evil in the sight of the Lord and served the
Baals; and they forsook the Lord, the God
of their fathers, who had brought them out
of the land of Egypt; they went after other
gods, from among the gods of the peoples
who were round about them, and bowed
down to them; and they provoked the Lord
to anger. They forsook the Lord, and
served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. {Josh
2:11-13 RSV}**

Idolatry! Why? How did they ever get into this mess so quickly after the tremendous victories

of Joshua? How do people suddenly fall from the height of a victorious experience into moral degradation? You find the key to the book in the very last verse. It is the key to this kind of experience in your own life:

**In those days there was no king in Is-
rael; every man did what was right in his
own eyes. {Judg 21:25 RSV}**

The story of Judges is the peril of what we might call “consecrated blundering.” It wasn't that these people did not want to do right. It was that they simply were deluded. They did what was right – it doesn't say they did what was wrong – they did what was right in their own eyes. But they didn't know what was right. This is the terrible peril of dedicated ignorance.

I must honestly say that I know of no peril from which God's people suffer more today than this. I find many Christians weak and stumbling, ineffective and defeated, because they are suffering from dedicated ignorance. There is nothing wrong with their dedication. They mean well. Time after time I have sat with young people and older people alike as they have told me terrible stories of agony and anguish and despair, and they have said: “I don't know what happened. I started out intending to do right. I thought I was; but something went wrong. I always ended up wrong.” They did not expose themselves to truth.

And, for this same reason, throughout the period of the judges there was a repeated cycle of failure and defeat and, finally, deliverance for awhile by God's grace; but then the cycle began all over again.

In the midst of this story of failure and defeat – and the last chapters of Judges are probably the darkest, most terrible picture of sexual depravity in all the history of Israel, arrived at by a repeated cycle of moral failure – right in the midst of this, there shines the wonderful little story of Ruth. In the book of Ruth you have a picture of faithfulness in the midst of defeat, you have the story of this heathen woman who heard the voice of God – heard the story of grace in a far country – and left all her friends and home and family, cleaved to Naomi, her mother in law, and returned with her to Israel. And there, in a beautiful story of romance – one of the most delightful stories in all the Bible – this young, lovely widow met a rich young bache-

lor, and they were married. It is a story that tears at your heartstrings as you read it:

When Ruth left her home and all her friends, she manifested a willingness to walk with God despite all the defeat and failure in the land around her. These words of Ruth to Naomi are perhaps the most beautiful ever uttered by any woman anywhere (Chapter 1, Verses 16-17):

“Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you.” {Ruth 1:16-17 RSV}

I always have the bride say those words to the groom when I conduct wedding services. It is such a marvelous expression of faithfulness.

Then we come to the book of **1 Samuel**. This is largely the story of two men – Samuel and Saul. In the latter part of the book, the early history of David is interwoven into the story of King Saul. Samuel was the greatest judge Israel ever had. His ministry lasted some forty years. During this time the people were still hungering after something other than God. The great peril of faith which is set forth in this book is given to us in Chapter 8, Verse 5. One day the people of Israel came to Samuel and said,

“Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint for us a king to govern us like all the nations.” {1 Sam 8:5 RSV}

Now, the trouble with this is that God had called this nation to be unlike all other nations. Here they were hungering to be like them, and particularly to have some kind of authority other than God.

Do you recognize this peril? It is what we can call ‘the peril of legalistic conformity,’ the desire for outward rule over life – one of the most devastating perils of all in the spiritual life. We soon find that the freedom and liberty we have in Christ means that we must continually be exercising judgments, making decisions, evaluating circumstances.

You know, I find lots of people who don't want to do that! They don't like the freedom God gives us in Christ. They come to me and say, “Don't tell me all these principles by which to determine what I should do. Just give me a rule. That is what I want. If I just had a rule, then I'd do that, and that ought to satisfy God.” But a life lived under rules is always a life lived in bondage.

This is the story of the life of the nation during Samuel's time. As a result, God allowed the people to choose a king. They chose Saul.

The story of Saul is one of the great tragedies of the Bible. He was a man of great promise, a handsome man with great abilities. But the story of this man's life is the peril of seeking the favor of man. The defeat of Saul came about as a result of his expedition against the Amalekites. He was told by God to kill all the Amalekites. But he refused and saved King Agag. Why did he do it? Because he felt this would find him favor in the eyes of the people. So the awful tragedy of Saul's life was the peril of a divided allegiance. He was quite content to serve God so long as it pleased those around him. The secret failure in this man's life was his continual hungering after the affection and honor and favor of other people.

Have you ever discovered this in your life? It is a peril which will defeat you ultimately and bring the same tragic end which Saul finally came to – his kingdom was taken from him, his crown taken from his head. He lost everything but his own personal relationship to God.

In the midst of this somberness, the light breaks through in the story of David and Jonathan – that marvelous story of the greatest friendship in all of history.

Next comes **2 Samuel**, and with it we will link **1 Chronicles**, because these two books cover the same chronological era. 1 Chronicles, though it covers the same events, by and large, as 2 Samuel, nevertheless gives us a slightly different viewpoint of them. It is well worth reading it right along with 2 Samuel because it gives you a closer insight into the inner story, the story of David in his kingship over Judah and Israel.

There is no more wonderful story in all of the Old Testament than the story of David. What a mighty man of God he was, a man after God's own heart! What unflinching faith is continually evident in this man growing up as a boy, the battle with

Goliath, living in the court of King Saul at the risk of his life, involved in all kinds of intrigues and fascinating episodes, the beautiful story of his friendship with Jonathan, and finally being made king, first over Judah for seven years and then over Israel and Judah together for thirty-three more years, a reign of forty years altogether – for the most part, a mighty reign.

However, there is an ugly side to the story of David. There came into his life a weakness which resulted, as we know, in the terrible moral fall of this man. He became guilty of the sins of adultery and murder. It is almost incomprehensible to think of David, God's own man, as guilty of these terrible things. Well, how did it start? That is what we always want to seek to understand if we want insight into the nature of sin. Where does it begin? You will find the clue in 2 Samuel, Chapter 11, Verse 1:

In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; ... But David remained at Jerusalem. {2 Sam 11:1 RSV}

In this verse we have hinted strongly for us the peril of a forgotten calling. The result was indulging in the lusts of the flesh. David was the king of Israel and Judah. It was his business to be at the head of the army. That is where he belonged. But he forgot his calling. He was resting when he had no need for rest. He was staying home and enjoying himself while the others went into battle. That was the beginning of the end; for, while he was home enjoying himself, he went up upon the housetop and, looking over into his neighbor's yard, saw a beautiful woman taking a bath. It did to him what such a sight does to any normal male – he was filled with lust. But he indulged his passion and took her. In order to cover up that sin, he had to murder her husband. So the terrible fall of David occurred. And it all began by the subtle pressure of the peril of a forgotten calling and the indulgence of the flesh.

The gleam of grace in this story is David's repentance. And that is why it can still be said of David, despite his double fall, that he was a man after God's own heart, because the minute he was faced with his sin he admitted it and repented, and he accepted the grace of God. There is no more

wonderful picture of a contrite heart than that of David, down on his face before God, crying out his sorrow and repentance over his sin as he realized what had happened. Out of that experience came the 52nd Psalm, which is such a marvelous expression of a heart which is truly repentant.

Then we come to **1 Kings** and the first part of **2 Chronicles**, which again we can link together because they cover the same general period. This is the story of two men, by and large, Solomon and Jeroboam, the rival to Solomon's son Rehoboam. Jeroboam became king of the northern kingdom, Israel. This is the account of the division of the kingdom between Judah and Israel.

The story of Solomon is fascinating. What a wonderful inheritance this man stepped into as he was crowned king even before his father David's death! He came into the kingdom at the height of its glory, and God gave him riches and power. At the beginning of his reign, as a young man, Solomon chose wisdom rather than anything for himself. God gave him wisdom. He was the author of the sublimely wise book of Proverbs, as well as the Song of Solomon and Ecclesiastes.

Along with his wisdom, God gave him power, magnificence, riches in abundance. But his misappropriation of these was the seed of Solomon's downfall. In the third chapter of 1 Kings find the beginning of the story of the peril which brought him failure and defeat (Verses 1-3):

Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king Egypt; he took Pharaoh's daughter, and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the Lord and the wall around Jerusalem. The people were sacrificing at the high places [pagan religious sites], however, because no house had yet been built for the name of the Lord.

Solomon loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father; only, he sacrificed and burned incense at the high places. {1 Ki 3:1-3 RSV}

And as we trace the account through, we find in Chapter 6, Verse 38, that Solomon was seven years in building the Temple. But then the first verse of Chapter 7 says that he “was building his own house thirteen years,” {1 Ki 7:1b RSV}. Doesn't that strike you as strange? Seven years

building the Temple, but thirteen years lavishing magnificence upon his own house! You can see the beginning of the self-centered life and the peril of a love of things. The downfall of Solomon was the peril of material magnificence. The end of the story comes in Chapter 11, Verses 1-3:

Now King Solomon loved many foreign women: the daughter of Pharaoh, and Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, "You shall not enter into marriage with them neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods"; Solomon clung these in love. He had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. {1 Ki 11:1-3 RSV}

And that is the story of the downfall of the wisest man who ever lived – the peril of material magnificence; a heart wooed away from the Lord by a love of things; spiritual strength shorn by giving himself to possessions.

The rest of the book is the story of Jeroboam, the rebellion he fomented, and the beginning of the kingdom of Israel. The peril set forth in Jeroboam's life is that of a substitute faith: Chapter 12, Verses 26-28:

And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David; if this people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah. So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought up out of the land of Egypt." {1 Ki 12:26-28 RSV}

What is the peril of a substitute faith? Religious deceit.

Not long ago at a women's meeting I spoke on the incarnation, the virgin birth, and the glory of the babe in Bethlehem who was God himself, manifest in the flesh. At the close of the meeting a woman bustled right up to me. She was one of

those ladies whom Harry Ironside used to call 'a female dreadnought.' She came running up under full power, and said to me, "Did I understand you to say that the baby of Bethlehem was God?" I said, "Yes, exactly so." "Oh," she said, "I can't believe anything like that! God is everywhere. God is vast and infinite. He fills the universe. How could he be a baby in Bethlehem?" I said, "That is the glory of the mystery – the mystery of godliness – that God was manifest in the flesh." "Oh," she said, "I don't understand! I can't accept anything like that." I said, "You know, there was a time when one of his own disciples took the Lord Jesus by the feet, and said to him, 'My Lord and my God.' Now, do you know more about him than his disciples did?" She said, "I was raised a Christian Scientist, and I was taught that God is in all universe, and I can't accept this idea." I said, "My dear lady, then you have been taught what the Bible does not teach. You have been taught a false faith." She turned on her heels and walked away.

This the peril which is deluding and destroying the faith of thousands and millions today. All over this country I run into stories of Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, and members of many other such delusive cults following right along in Jeroboam's sin, succumbing to the pressure of a substitute faith of false gods with Christian names. How many have been destroyed by that? But right in the midst of all of this here comes shining out, by the grace of God, the story of a man who lived and walked untainted by these pressures – Elijah the prophet.

Now we come to **2 Kings** and the latter part of **2 Chronicles**. These portions of Scripture also link together chronologically. Here we have the rapid-fire story, over and over again, of the downfall of one king after another, usually murdered by someone who has a hungering for the throne, government by assassination, with which we have become somewhat familiar in recent days in our own country. The story of the nation of Israel, the ten tribes which constituted the northern kingdom, is that of moral abandonment, the peril of a nation which gives itself up to what it supposes is liberty.

Do you know anyone suffering from that? Have you ever said to yourself, "Oh, I am tired of these afflictions of the Christian life! If I could just do what I want and I go where I please and say what I like and abandon myself to the pursuit of

pleasure, then I would be happy.” Well, read the result in 2 Kings, Chapter 17, Verses 16-17:

And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Asherah [an idol], and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination, and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. {2 Ki 17:16-17 RSV}

This is the same condition which Paul characterizes in Romans 1: Men who knew God refused to acknowledge him or give thanks; so God gave them up, gave them up, gave them up – three times over – to the most dissolute depraved moral practices. This is the story of moral abandonment – of flinging aside all the bonds, kicking over the traces, living life as you please. And the result is the removal of every restraint of godliness and goodness in the life. It is moral disaster. It happened here in Israel, and the rest of 2 Kings is the story of Israel, followed by the captivity of Judah, the southern kingdom, the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The downfall of Judah is the story of the peril of the hardened heart – of a nation which was warned by the downfall of the northern kingdom, but refused to heed that warning and became indifferent to the warnings of God; so they failed. Chapter 21 gives us the story in Verses 10-14:

And the Lord said by his servants the prophets, "Because Manasseh king of Judah has committed these abominations, and has done things more wicked than all that the Amorites did, who were before him, and has made Judah also to sin with his idols; therefore thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, Behold, I am bringing upon Jerusalem and Judah such evil that the ears of every one who hears of it will tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the measuring line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab [i.e. Israel, the northern kingdom. God says he will do to Judah as he did to Israel.] and I will wipe Jerusalem as one wipes a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down. And I will cast off the remnant of my heritage, and give them into the hand of their enemies, and they would become a

prey and a spoil to all their enemies," {2 Ki 21:10-14 RSV}

Why? Because they succumbed to the terrible pressure of a hardened heart, of indifference to the warnings of God. But in the midst of the book is the beautiful story of Hezekiah and Josiah kings of Judah – one who cleansed the Temple and one who found again the book of the Law.

This brings us to the last books of history – **Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther** – which we will take as a unit. They are the story of the nation in captivity – deteriorated, fallen apart at the seams morally, carried away at last into bondage. But, while they are in bondage, God begins to work. And, at last, after the seventy years' captivity, Ezra is raised up to lead a group back into the desolate land of Palestine to begin rebuilding the Temple.

The book of Ezra is the story of a discouraged people, along with a reluctance to leave captivity. Imagine that! A reluctance to leave Babylon. Only a handful could be persuaded to go. The rest were so blinded that they decided to stay in captivity, and they drifted off and lost themselves among the nations of the world. We call them “the ten lost tribes of Israel.” No one knows where they are, or who they are. They are completely lost. But those who were willing to go back found all the promises of God waiting for them when they returned to the land.

The peril of these three books together is that of a discouraged heart. Sometimes we get into this frame of mind, don't we? We say, “What's the use? I might just as well quit. I might as well throw it all in and just stay where I am. I know I am not victorious. I know I am not walking with God. I know I am getting nowhere. I might just as well quit and stay this way.” Well, this is the awful pressure which comes upon us in that state. But the story of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther is the story of the triumph of faith in the midst of that circumstance. A remnant finally returned and began to build the second Temple.

Then Nehemiah comes along, and his book is the story of the determined opposition and harassment of everybody else trying to keep these people from coming back into the grace and glory of God. When we are in defeat, we discover that every obstacle will be put in our path to keep us from coming back to God. But the book of Esther is the

story of the victory of God in the midst of even impossible circumstances. God watches over his own and delivers them. And the shining of the grace in these three books is seen in the personal lives of these three people – Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. All three manifested the triumph of faith in the midst of defeated circumstances.

Now, in your own life do you recognize any of the perils narrated in these twelve historical books? Are you struggling against any of these forces? Then I suggest that you mark the peril you are particularly up against, take the pertinent book, read it on your knees, and pray it through, asking God to speak to you and show you the way of deliverance in the midst of that kind of defeat.

That is the purpose of all these historical books – that we might know the pressures which are upon

us and the way by which God can take us through. May these twelve books be a blessing to you.

Prayer

We thank you, our Heavenly Father, for the magnificent book you have given us, a book carefully prepared and revealed to men in a magnificent way, so that we might know the truth and be able to walk in the glory and power of a life of triumph and victory in the midst of defeat and despair and failure. Lord, save us from these perils. Grant that we may walk in such a way as to be continually pleasing in your sight, as was the Lord Jesus himself; for we pray in his name, Amen.

Music to Live By

by Ray C. Stedman

To begin this message, let's review what we have covered so far in this survey of the Scriptures. What is the purpose of revelation? Why has God given us the tremendous fund of facts and knowledge contained in his Word? To bring us to maturity in Jesus Christ – that is what it is all for. If the Word of God doesn't do that, then all this information is wasted, so far as we are concerned. The giving of the Word of God during the course of the ages, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit working in men of old to record it; the miracle of its preservation to bring us the book we have today; the entire ministry of the Holy Spirit in interpreting, illuminating and teaching it – all this is wasted if we do not begin to grow into mature human beings, if we do not begin to discover the possibilities that God has for us in his great plan. This is what the Scriptures are for.

To this purpose, as we have seen, both the Old Testament and the New Testament make their contributions. The Old Testament contributes preparation; the New Testament gives fulfillment, or realization. We have been concentrating on the Old Testament and its function of preparing us to receive truth. If you aren't prepared, then when the truth is given, you won't receive it. So there is very little reason to read the New Testament – beyond a certain point – if you haven't read the Old Testament, because you won't understand the New Testament; you won't grasp it, won't lay hold of it. You need to be prepared. This is why there is so much shallowness in Christian life today – because there is inadequate preparation. The plowing has been left undone.

We have seen that the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, develop the pattern of God's work with men. Each of them expresses a part of the program of God. This is in some ways the most important part of the Bible, because it

shows us the way God works over and over again in human life. It is the way he is working in my life. This is the way he has been working in human life for centuries. He won't vary. He is going to work this way, and each of these five books reveals one of the steps:

- Genesis is the book which reveals the need of man;
- Exodus reveals the grace of God, the redeeming work of the Holy Spirit;
- Leviticus is the book of worship, of approach, of access to God – the book which teaches people how to live with God in their midst;
- Numbers is the book of wandering, of the desert experience – the ups and downs so familiar to many of us in our Christian lives;
- Deuteronomy is the book of helplessness and of obedience in depending upon God – the book which corresponds to the sixth chapter of Romans, where we have the preparation of the heart to enter into the promised land of rest in the work of Another.

Thus these five books reveal the pattern God takes in bringing us to a genuine experience of what he has for us.

Then, in the twelve historical books the perils of life are revealed. If you approach them in this light, it will make these books come alive to you – will make reading your Bible a whole new experience. We encounter various perils; we face them every day. Often we don't know how to meet them. Sometimes we don't even know how to analyze

them. Well, how are we going to find out? One of these twelve books tells us. Look your peril up in the book where it is illustrated. There you will have the whole story given – how to analyze the peril, how to approach it, how to defeat it – all beautifully dramatized for you in the Word of God. There is the peril of premature contentment in the book of Joshua; the peril of consecrated blundering is in Judges; the perils of a forgotten calling, of divided allegiance and of false faith are revealed in the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles; finally, the peril of the discouraged heart is dealt with in Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

Do you suffer from any of these perils? These books are given us in order that we might see how to overcome such perils and have victory.

We are ready now to review the third section of the Old Testament – the five poetical books: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

Have you read all of them?

The poetical books are a reflection of the rejoicing and the protests of man in response to life. Here you find the sigh, the exultation, the anger, the contentment, the tears, and the laughter in life. Although we call these books “poetical,” it doesn't mean they rhyme. It means they have a structure of repeated ideas, for this is the form of poetry the Hebrews employed. These books reflect all the changing, colorful passions of life; all the feelings of the heart, of the soul; the deep-seated, almost inexpressible yearnings and desires of men and women; the fleeting, changing, ephemeral, passing fancies that flit across our minds. All are found in these books. They are marvelous books of expression. Because man is a threefold being, and these five books are bound to man, they reflect what man is – what we are. They fall into three divisions which correspond to the makeup of man – the spirit, the soul and the body.

We begin with the book of **Job**, which addresses the needs of the spirit of man – the song of the spirit. Job is the oldest of the books of the Bible and, in many ways, the most profound, because it is the deep protest of the spirit of man in the face of apparently senseless suffering.

Recently we heard of an instance in which the children of four families were left fatherless, the men taken out of a church suddenly and tragically –

a pastor and three laymen from one church – killed without warning in what seems to have been a senseless tragedy. Why? Do we not feel some protest against this kind of thing? Deep in our spirit is there not a surging almost of anger at this kind of tragedy? Why does life confront us with these situations?

Well, the book of Job faces this problem squarely. It tells what the answer is, for here is the cry of a tortured man who cannot understand the ways of God. I have often heard this cry – as does anyone who works with human beings to any extent at all – this deep, almost unuttered, inexpressible protest from the very center of man's being, the spirit of man within him crying out in a tragic protest against the seemingly senseless suffering that life affords.

Most of us know the story of Job. It is a rather simple story. It begins in heaven with an encounter between God and Satan. Satan comes and challenges God, and God challenges Satan in return and calls his attention to a man named Job, a man of remarkable ability. It is difficult to place the land of Uz, where he lived, but we can logically fit the time of the book of Job between the 11th and 12th chapters of the book of Genesis – way back in the history of man. God said to Satan (Job 1:8),

“Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?” {Job 1:8b RSV}

Satan didn't challenge that statement, but he raised a question about it (Verses 9b-12a):

“Does Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.” And the Lord said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.” {Job 1:9b-12a RSV}

You know the story – how there came one tragic event after another. As soon as the message had arrived about one terrible catastrophe it was immediately followed by another. An invading

army took away all of Job's wealth. A windstorm destroyed his house; his children had been gathered in it, and they were all killed. One by one, the tragic reports came to him – until everything was swept away in one day. What a terribly shocking experience! But Job was absolutely unmoved. He bowed in sorrow before God, but his heart was open to him. God said to Satan, “You see, Job still serves me,” {cf, Job 2:3}. And Satan made that famous statement, “All that a man has he will give for his life,” {Job 2:4b RSV}. Then he went on to argue, “The trouble is, you haven't touched him deeply enough yet. Let me touch his body, and then you will see him turn and curse you to your face,” {cf, Job 2:5}. God said, “He is in your power; only spare his life,” {Job 4:6b RSV}.

The result was the outbreak of a terrible siege of boils on Job. The book tells us he was covered with boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet.

When I was a young man, for a time I had a series of boils that were very, very painful. On one or two occasions, over a period of some months, I had two or three boils at one time. I was like a wild man. I was reduced to a frustrated frenzy. I could hardly control myself at times, the pain was so unrelenting.

Even one boil will keep a man well occupied – and his whole family with him! But here was a man who had boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. So poor Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat on ashes. In abject misery he faced the situation in which he found himself – the cry of a tortured man who cannot understand what life has done to him.

All this was aggravated by the visit of his three friends. Job's friends have become famous. We still meet them today – comforters who come around but don't comfort! But perhaps we have been a little harsh on these three men. They were very comforting when they first came. They sat there for seven days and seven nights and never said a word. At least that was some help on their part. They sat in silence, suffering with Job. But then each one delivered a long, philosophical discourse, the gist of which in each case was that suffering is a result of sin – that if a man is suffering, there must therefore be personal sin in his life. Each one tried to get Job to confess the personal sin in his life. Each one tried to get Job to confess the sin – to bare the awful, hidden secret of his life

which must be the reason behind this terrible suffering.

There are many folks like that today, you know. They are quite ready to insinuate, in some way or other, that you must be suffering because of some terrible sin you are not willing to reveal. Job's comforters are still with us.

But Job replied as well as he could, and yet he got nowhere. His agony was only increased by these men. Then there came a fourth man, a young man evidently, who modestly said he had kept silent as long as he could. But, he said, he was like a man whose belly is so full it is ready to burst. We meet men like this occasionally – speakers who cannot keep silent. This young man couldn't keep this words to himself, so he began on Job. His argument was that sickness or suffering is a form of God's discipline, intended to bring us back into fellowship with him. In many ways he was nearer to the truth than any of the other men, but still he did not have the whole truth.

Then, in one of the most remarkable passages in all of literature – I doubt if you can find its parallel anywhere – in the 38th and 39th chapters, God himself appears and takes up the argument of Job. It is a tremendous examination. In Verses 2 and 3 of Chapter 38, God says:

**“Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?
Gird up your loins like a man,
I will question you, and you shall declare to me.” {Job 38:2-3 RSV}**

God asks if Job can answer any of several simple questions.

If you want a test to challenge the mightiest intellect that man has ever produced, I suggest you give anyone the 38th and 39th chapters of Job and ask him or her to take this examination.

It is an examination in natural history and is one of the most remarkable passages in all literature. God begins with this simple question (Verses 4-7):

**“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding,
Who determined its measurements – surely you know!
Or who stretched the line upon it?
On what were its bases sunk,**

**or who laid its cornerstone,
when the morning stars sang together,
and all the sons of God shouted for
joy?" {Job 38:4-7 RSV}**

Then he moves on to more difficult questions (Verses 12a, 17a, 19, 28):

**"Have you commanded the morning since
your days began, ...?" {Job 38:12
RSV}**

**"Have the gates of death been revealed to
you ...?" {Job 38:17a RSV}**

**"Where is the way to the dwelling of
light,
and where is the place of darkness?"
{Job 38:19 RSV}**

**"Has the rain a father,
or who has begotten the drops of dew?"
{Job 38:28 RSV}**

And he continues, posing the questions of who set the stars whirling in their courses and who maintains the universe. When God is through, Job is found flat on his face crying out (42:6),

**"... I despise myself,
and repent in dust and ashes." {Job
42:6b RSV}**

When you get to that place you come to what the whole book is all about. The book of Job is nothing more nor less than Chapter 7 of the book of Romans. You will recall that the Apostle Paul ends that chapter by saying (Verse 24),

**Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver
me from this body of death? {Rom 7:24
RSV}**

This is exactly where God brings Job. Thus we learn that apparent punishment or suffering at God's hand is but the way by which he teaches us that man by himself is helpless, that he can do nothing, that man has nothing to stand upon. But God is sufficient for every circumstance of life. All man needs is God, and God only. When we come to this place in Job, or Romans 7, then we are ready to hear the great declaration of Romans 8 (Verses 1, 4b, 2): "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit... For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ

Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death." This is where Job ended up. As a result God, in tender grace and mercy, poured out blessing upon him. He entered into what is the equivalent of a 'Romans 8 experience.' If you would like to understand the book of Job, read Romans 7 and 8. Conversely, if you want to understand Romans 7 and 8, read the book of Job.

Now we come to the second division in this 'experience section' of the Old Testament – the books of Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. Here we have the songs of the soul. The soul of man is made up of three faculties: the intelligence, the emotions and the will – or, to put them in the order in which these books address them, the emotions, the intelligence and the will. In the book of Psalms we have all that the soul ever experiences in terms of emotional responses to circumstances. In the book of Proverbs we have the intelligence at work, ferreting out through experience the best way to react to situations – all the accumulated wisdom of man, guided by divine light. In the book of Ecclesiastes we have the will of man expressed – the deliberate investigation and exploration by the will of various areas of knowledge and experience.

Psalms is the book where every emotional experience of life is reflected.

I once heard it said that it would be of great benefit to Christians if someone would invent a proper expression for them to use when they hit their thumb with a hammer. No language available today is quite adequate. A Christian, of course, can't resort to profanity, and "land's sake" seems rather mild in such a circumstance! But if there were such an expression it would be found in the book of Psalms.

Psalms is intended to express every possible facet of human emotion. This marvelous book is itself divided into five books. Each ends with the words "Amen and Amen" except the last, which ends with the words "Praise the Lord!" In these books you find a five-fold pattern which relates directly to the five-fold pattern found in the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch. Do you remember the pattern?

Genesis is the book of human need. And in the first book of Psalms – Psalms 1 through 41 – you have the great expressions of the need of the human heart. For example, the 23rd Psalm (Verses 1-3a):

**The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not
want;
he makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. {Psa 23:1-3a RSV}**

A great expression of the hunger of the heart for a shepherd – this is the major note struck in this first book of Psalms.

The book of Exodus is the book of grace, of redeeming love – of God's unmerited grace laying hold of a human heart in its hour of desperation and need, and ministering to it. This is the note struck in the second book of Psalms – Psalms 42 to 72 – the note of redeeming grace. You can hear it, for instance, in these wonderful words of Psalm 46:1-3:

**God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the
earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart
of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its
tumult. {Psa 46:1-3 RSV}**

Leviticus is the book of worship, where man is told how to live in close fellowship with a living God. And this is the note struck in Psalms 73-89 – the third book. Here you have a note of reverence, a somber note of the majesty of God. If this is what you feel sometimes – a desire to express worship – turn to this book and read some of these mighty Psalms. Look, for instance, at the 76th Psalm and you will see how this note is struck in Verses 4 through 9:

**Glorious art thou, more majestic
than the everlasting mountains.
The stouthearted were stripped of their
spoil;
they sank into sleep;
all the men of war
were unable to use their hands.
At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lay stunned.
But thou, terrible art thou!
Who can stand before thee
when once thy anger is roused?
From the heavens thou didst utter judgment;
the earth feared and was still,**

**when God arose to establish judgment
to save all the oppressed of the earth.
{Psa 76:4-9 RSV}**

Numbers is the book of wandering, of the desert experience – the ups and downs of living. And the fourth book of Psalms – Psalms 90 - 106 – is the book of alternate victory and defeat in the experience of life. Psalm 97 gives you a taste of it in the expression of the Psalmist in Verse 12. He says, in a joyful mood,

**Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous,
and give thanks to his holy name!
{Psa 97:12 RSV}**

But then, right nearby in Psalm 102 you find the opposite (Verses 1-3):

**Hear my prayer, O Lord!
let my cry come to thee!
Do not hide thy face from me
in the day of my distress! ...
For my days pass away like smoke,
and my bones burn like a furnace.
{Psa 102:1-3 RSV}**

– the alternating experience of wandering in the desert – up and down!

The last book of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy, is a book of helplessness and dependent obedience. This corresponds to the fifth book of Psalms – Psalms 107 to the end – where is struck the note of obedience and praise. Perhaps nothing gathers it up more beautifully than that well-known verse with which the 139th Psalm closes:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!
{Psa 139:23-24 RSV}**

So there are the five books of Psalms. The yearning of hope is expressed in the Messianic Psalms; the burning of anger in the Imprecatory Psalms – those Psalms which seem to call down fire from heaven on everything which opposes God. The sighing of sorrow is found in the Penitential Psalms; the glorying in grace in those Psalms which rejoice in victory. Whatever your feeling is, turn to the Psalms!

A few years ago I went into a house and stumbled upon the body of a man who had committed suicide. The body lay in a pool of his own blood. What a shock it was! I had known him. He had been coming to me for help. I had been counseling with him, and I found his body lying there. That night, when it came time to go to bed, I found I couldn't sleep – I was *so* disturbed and troubled. In that hour of desolation, my wife and I turned to the Psalms and read some of them together. It was the only book that could quiet our hearts in that hour of trouble and anguish. This is the book where men and women of God have pillowed their heads in times of distress and heartache and sorrow. It is also the place to find the note of exaltation and rejoicing in the day of gladness and hope. All the expressions of the heart are found reflected in the Psalms.

The book of **Proverbs** follows. It is the expression of the intelligence of man guided by divine wisdom. Here you have the logical, reasonable approach to life – the discovery of the laws of heaven for life on earth. It is a very simple book and begins with a magnificent introduction explaining why it was written. I love these words (Verses 1-6):

**The proverbs of Solomon, son of David,
king of Israel:**

**That men may know wisdom and instruction,
understanding words of insight,
receive instruction in wise dealing,
righteousness, justice, and equity;
that prudence may be given to the simple,
knowledge and discretion to the youth –
the wise man also may hear and increase
in learning,
and the man of understanding acquire
skill,
to understand a proverb and a figure,
the words of the wise and their riddles.**
{Prov 1:1-6 RSV}

And then the secret of it all (Verse 7):

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of
knowledge;
fools despise wisdom and instruction.**
{Prov 1:7 RSV}

There follows a series of remarkable discourses on wisdom, given from a father to a son. Ten times in this section we find words to this effect: “Hear, my son...” The discourses begin with the child in the home, and then follow the youth out into the busy streets of the city as he encounters various circumstances of life. These proverbs teach him how to choose and make friends; then they follow him as he becomes a man facing some of the perils which are at work to destroy his life; and, finally, they help him to discover some of the forces which will make him strong.

These discourses are followed by two collections of proverbs – from Chapter 10 to Chapter 24 and from Chapter 25 to Chapter 31. The latter collection is the proverbs of Solomon which were copied by the men of King Hezekiah. Some people jokingly ‘quote’ from the ‘book of Hezekiah’ without realizing it is actually in the Bible. But here it is – in the latter part of Proverbs! The last chapter of this remarkable book is one of the most magnificent descriptions of a perfect wife found anywhere in literature.

Ecclesiastes (the title means “The Preacher”) is the protest of man's will against the monotony and emptiness of life. It is a deliberate investigation by a man with unlimited resources and money, and wholly unhindered in the expenditure of his time. Solomon had everything it took, and he deliberately set himself to answer these questions:

- Can life be satisfying apart from God?
- Can the things found under the sun satisfy the human heart?

He set himself systematically and deliberately, by the choice of his will, to investigate these areas.

He first tried knowledge, and he said that the result was nothing but emptiness – vanity. Then he tried pleasure; he gave free reign to his passions – he did whatever he felt like doing.

This reminds me of that brilliant young Englishman, George Gordon, who, when he was twenty-nine years old, had so dissipated himself that he wrote these words:

My days are yellow in the leaf,
the fruit of life is gone;
the worm, the canker, and the grief
are mine alone.

That was the discovery of ‘the preacher’ regarding the pursuit of pleasure. He says it was all vanity. Then he tried wealth, and he found that great amounts of money gave a man no more than poverty. It was all emptiness and vanity. Then he tried philosophy as a means of facing life with its various problems, and the mystery of death, and the inexplicable tragedies of sin. His whole conclusion was, “It is all vanity.”

Finally, he comes to the very remarkable statement addressed particularly to young people. In the 11th chapter, Verse 9, he says,

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth; walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. [In other words, "Live your life; don't get discouraged."] But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment. {Eccl 11:9 RSV}

Then his final conclusion, near the end of Chapter 12 (Verse 13):

The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole ... of man. {Eccl 12:13 RSV}

Most translations read “the whole duty of man.” But the word *duty* is not in the Hebrew: “This is the whole of man.”

This man has finally stumbled upon a brilliant truth! He has discovered, after years of searching, that there is nothing which makes man complete except God, and at the conclusion of the book he says so.

The last of the poetical books is the **Song of Solomon**. In many ways this is probably the least understood and most neglected of all the books of the Bible – probably because it is the expression of the ideal for the human body. It is a flagrantly sensual book in many ways, for it is a song of the perfection of bodily grace and love. Therefore it has been regarded as shameful – as even the human body itself is oftentimes thought to be shameful, though, of course, it isn't – it is only its abuse which is shameful. This book declares that the purest expression of love – if it is really pure – is bodily. There is no more beautiful sight to a man

than the beautiful body of a woman, and there is no higher expression of nobility and strength to a woman than the clean, fine body of a man. This sometimes bothers people when they read this book. It seems to them almost a reflection of the sordid, sensuous literature of our day. But as we read it through, we catch a very definite note of purity and wholesomeness about it. It puts bodily life in proper perspective.

The story of the book is a bit difficult to trace, but in general it is the story of young maiden whose family evidently rented attractive land from King Solomon in the north country of Israel. She is the Cinderella of the family. She has two brothers and two sisters, but she has been left to tend the flocks and to work in the vineyard. She spends her time out in the open sun all day, so she is sunburned. “I am very dark, but comely,” she says. She watches the beautiful ladies of the court riding in their carriages up and down the road, and envies them, but is willing to remain in her quiet, humble life. One day she looks up to see a handsome stranger, a shepherd, looking at her very intently. She is a bit disturbed by his gaze, but he says to her, “You are all fair, my love; there is no flaw in you.” That goes a long way to establish a friendship, and they soon draw closer to one another. Then he suddenly leaves. But before he goes he promises that he will return, and she believes him. Through the night she dreams of him and wishes for him, remembering what he looks like, and describing him to her friends. Then one day there is a great commotion in the valley. She looks out, and there is the royal carriage of the king, and all the valley is excited. To the amazement of everyone, the king sends his riders to her house with the message that he desires to see her. She comes out, shy and afraid, and is brought to the royal carriage. When she looks inside she sees that the king is none other than her shepherd lover. He carries her away to the palace, and they enter into a blissful state of wonderful communion together.

As we read the book we can see in it the wonderful old story of God's redeeming grace to man. We are that maiden, and he is the great King who has come down – in disguise, as it were – to manifest his love for us and has gone away, but he shall come again to take us away. In the meantime, there is the expectation of his coming and a yearning for his presence. There is the memory of his preciousness and the rejoicing in his nobility of manhood

and the remembrance of his expression of love, as well. When we get through we can see that it is nothing less than what the Apostle Paul describes in Ephesians 5, Verses 25-27:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25-27 RSV}

Well, this entire section, then, makes it obvious that the Bible is the book that goes with man. It is a description, divinely given, entering into every detail of our lives – spelled out for us – of man as God intended him to be. What a help! I urge you to read it.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for this revelation of your truth. How poverty-stricken we have been as we have kept ourselves from these pages which are so rich and radiant, so fragrant with experiences which we have not yet known or understood! Teach us to enter into them, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Things Surely to be Believed, Part 1

by Ray C. Stedman

During World War II, when the western Pacific battle was being fought back and forth across the green jungles of Guadalcanal island, one of the many American airmen who were shot down found himself on a neighboring island which had a reputation of being inhabited by cannibals. He wondered what would happen to him. Sure enough, he hadn't been on the ground very long before some of the natives found him and took him to their village. But when he got to their village he discovered they were not cannibals – they were Christians! He was not a Christian, but a pagan young American. He would have to wait a long time in this village before he could be restored to his outfit. One day, as he was going out the door of the hut in which he lived, he saw one of these natives sitting at his door reading his Bible. The American airman sneeringly said, "What in the world are you reading? Do you believe in that book? Why, in America we have long since learned that that book is just a lot of myth and fable. There is no use wasting your time reading a book like that." The former cannibal didn't say anything for a moment. Then he pointed to a big black iron pot beside his fire, and said, "If it weren't for this book, you would be in that pot!"

That is rather dramatic evidence of the power of the Scriptures to change the human heart. Sometimes we tend to forget this transforming power of the Word of God. But the writer of Hebrews was not kidding when he said, in Chapter 4, Verse 12, that the Word of God is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Surely there is no sharper instrument than the Word of the living God to get way down inside the human life and change us by cutting away the cancer of sin and delivering us from the

chains which have enslaved us. In our study of the Scriptures, I hope we will always bear in mind this great fact: God's Word is a word of power. We get so familiar with this Word, either in general or in particular, that we sometimes forget the tremendous power which is hidden away in it.

Remember that in First Corinthians 1:18 Paul says, "the word of the cross ... is the power of God." I remember hearing Dr. Dick Halverson tell about speaking to a group of students one night. During a question-and-answer period, one of them asked him, "Dr. Halverson, how can I make the Word of God relevant to the situation in which I live?" He was about to answer that question when time ran out and he had to carry it over to the next night. During the intervening day he was thinking about that question. "The longer I thought about it," he said, "the more I began to see the underlying egotism of a question like that: 'How can I make the Word of God relevant?'" He thought of the above verse: "the word of the cross ... is the power of God." When the time came to answer the question he said: "I would like simply to substitute for the phrase the Word of God' in this question what the Word of God says is the equivalent: 'the power of God.' The question then would read this way: 'How can I make the power of God relevant? How can I, a puny human creature, make that which is the power of God meaningful to human life?' Well, that is the most egotistical of questions, isn't it?" As Charles Spurgeon once said about the Bible: "You are wasting your time defending it. You don't need to defend the Bible. The Bible is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Turn it loose; it will defend itself!" The Scriptures are like that.

In this series of studies we have seen that the purpose of the Old Testament is to prepare us to receive truth from God. We never will receive it unless we are prepared. I realize that many of us begin our Christian encounter by reading the New Testament; and to us, at first, the New Testament speaks with much more clarity and purpose to our own situations than the Old Testament. Unfortunately, many of us never seem to get around to reading the Old Testament. But I am convinced, after years of observation both in my own life and in the lives of others, that we can only go so far in appropriating the truths of the New Testament without beginning to get hold of the Old Testament. If we do not, at a certain stage in our life, begin to read and understand and appropriate the message of the Old Testament, we cannot take in all the riches of the New. These two books are made to go together. We can go only so far in the New until we have begun to lay hold of the Old.

We have already seen in the Old Testament that the first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy, set out for us the pattern of God's working in our lives. And God will never work in any other way than by this great pattern that he has set forth. If you would like to understand how God will work with you, you will see it in these first five books. They are followed by the historical books – Joshua through Esther. We saw that their purpose is to set forth the perils which confront us in living the Christian life in a 20th Century world. If you want to understand the opposing forces in all their terrible oppression of the human heart, their sly subtlety and their cruel destructiveness, spend time in these historical books. They are marvelously instructive in this way. They are followed, in turn, by what we call the poetical books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These express the protests and rejoicings of the heart exposed to the perils of the world and entering into the pattern of God. There is not a single emotion to which the human heart is subject that isn't found in these poetical books. If you want to understand yourself, this is the part of the Old Testament to which you need to turn.

Now we come to the books of the great prophets of the Old Testament. There are sixteen of them. We will review the first eight in this study, and then will finish them in the next. We cannot dwell long on them, but in brief compass we want to discover what each has to say to us. **If**

- The pattern is given in the Pentateuch, and
- The perils are set forth in the historical books and
- The protests of the spirit and soul are expressed in the poetical books, **then**
- In the prophets we discover the mighty promises of God.

What is a promise? At many weddings someone sings *Oh, Promise Me*. When two young people stand at the wedding altar and promise each other, what are they doing? They are committing themselves to give of themselves to each other. A promise, basically, is a commitment to share yourself. If you give a promise to someone, you are committing something of your time, your energy, your resources to that person.

If you say, "I'll meet you at the corner of such-and-such street at such-and-such time," you have thereby committed a certain part of yourself to that person for a certain length of time.

That is what a promise is. It is a sharing of self.

So, the great promises of the Bible are the efforts of God to share himself with us. When we understand the promises, we will understand something more of the nature and the character of our God. Every promise is a commitment on God's part to give of himself. This is why an understanding of the prophets is of such momentous importance to us in reading the Bible, because it is here that we understand what God says he will do. How can you exercise faith if you don't have a promise? So often people prate on and on about faith and belief, and yet they never say anything about what to believe or what your faith should rest upon.

Do you remember the song popular a few years ago entitled *I Believe*? That is all it says: "I believe."

- "I believe for every drop of rain that falls" something else happens.
- "Whenever a baby cries" someone is around to feed it!

It never does say why. That song always bothered me – it kept saying all these wonderful things to believe, but never one word of why.

Faith is of absolutely no value if it does not rest upon a promise. A promise is the fact upon which faith lays hold, and it pulls feeling right along behind, and thus makes available to the heart all that God wants to give.

What is the promise of the book of **Isaiah**, the first of the prophets? One of the mightiest books in the Bible, it is essentially the promise of the cleansing of God, the promise of a new beginning. You see this right in the first chapter. One of the key verses of this book is Verse 18 of Chapter 1:

**“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.” {Isa 1:18
RSV}**

The promise of a new beginning!

We see it in the experience of the prophet himself in the sixth chapter – in that transcending vision when Isaiah stood in the temple and saw the Almighty on a throne, high and lifted up; and the seraphim (angels) gathered around rank upon rank, and one called to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy...” and smoke filled the temple. As the prophet fell down before this majestic, awesome sight, he cried (Verse 5):

**... “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;” {Isa 6:5b
RSV}**

Do you remember what happened? An angel took a burning coal from the altar, touched Isaiah’s lips with it and declared his guilt taken away and his sin forgiven – the promise of the new beginning. Then God said to him, in the great commissioning service, “who will go for us?” And Isaiah stood up and said, “Here I am! Send me.” The promise is repeated in what is perhaps the most marvelous chapter in the Bible, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, where, through the twilight of prophetic vision, there suddenly breaks forth the glorious figure of the Messiah hanging upon a cross – the One who

**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.
(Verse 5)**

In some ways Isaiah is the most glorious book in the Bible. I have come to love it, for it declares that whenever we discover that in some weakness or faltering failure we have stumbled off into sin and darkness and despair, nevertheless God always has a place of new beginning.

I wish every one of you could have heard the artless eloquence with which a lovely young Christian woman recently told her story to our young people. She told how she had drifted into a life of violence, crime, dope, sadism, filth, and shocking, sordid, repulsive living. In the midst of all that, her heart was hungering for deliverance. But she never found it until she came to the foot of the cross. There she found life – in the transforming message which came to her in utter simplicity, without any emotion connected with it, telling her that if she would give her heart to Jesus Christ she would be a new creature in Christ. This is the story of Isaiah – the promise of a new beginning.

In the book of **Jeremiah** we have exactly the opposite. Jeremiah is the promise of the absence of God. Did you know that God promises to be absent from your life, under certain conditions? Not that he actually is absent, because he never is from anyone – God pervades the universe – but he promises to leave us without any sense of his fellowship or of his person. He does this deliberately, under certain conditions. This is the message of Jeremiah. It corresponds to the New Testament promise given in the words of our Lord to Jerusalem:

“Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Luke 13:35 {RSV})

Throughout the whole Bible you have references to this fact – that when, in some incredible vanity, we attempt to match strength with the Almighty, and we refuse to bow our wills to his, God will ultimately let us have our way, and we wander

off into weakness and darkness and misery and desolation of spirit, exactly as Jerusalem was left, finally – desolate. Jeremiah was sent to that bleeding city to declare to them that their city was lost, and that they were going into captivity for seventy years. But the book closes with a bright ray of light. God never leaves us lost. When the heart repents and turns back, then Isaiah's word is operative – the promise of a new beginning.

Ezekiel's book is the promise of the presence of God, as Jeremiah's was the promise of the absence of God. It is the Old Testament book which sets forth the corresponding promise in the New Testament: "If a man loves me," Jesus said in John 14:23, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." This great prophecy of Ezekiel begins with a vision of God which is the most remarkable, transcending vision in the whole Bible.

I have in my library an interesting pamphlet someone gave me which attempts to explain the opening chapters of Ezekiel as being his record of a visit by creatures from outer space, but that is rather far-fetched, I am afraid.

This is a book which sets forth what God is like. It opens with this marvelous vision of God and closes with the Temple of God, where God is at rest with his people. In between it shows how God moves to bring about his presence in the human heart.

Daniel is the great predictive book of the Old Testament and is the book that sets forth the promise of the illumination of the human mind by God. It corresponds to Jesus' New Testament promise, given in John 8:12: "he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

This is one of the greatest books I know of for teenagers. I urge every teenager to read the book of Daniel again and again and again.

It is the story of a teenager in captivity, in a hostile environment, having to stand against all the powerfully sweeping forces of the world of his day, and of how God enabled him to stand firm against the pressure of that environment, and to be God's instrument of blessing in the greatest nation of the world of his day. It goes on to show how God illuminated this man's mind to enable him to see through all the deceptive phoniness of the philosophy of his day; to perceive the truth of the living

God and what God was doing in that nation; and to predict what God would do with all the nations down through the course of history, even beyond our own day.

Hosea, in many ways, is the most beautiful book in the Bible. It is a love story – the story of a broken marriage and of the heartache which unfaithfulness brings into a life. It is a story of the persistence of God, the promise of God's persistent redemptive action. It sets forth the New Testament promise of Philippians 1:6: "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." It is wonderful story of how God sent Hosea to marry a harlot. And when she left him and went back to her evil trade, God sent him back to her again to take her to himself. This woman led Hosea through heartbreak and shame and humiliation, but God kept his heart aflame with love for her, and finally she was won back and restored. It is a marvelous story, beautifully picturing the love of God.

In **Joel** you have the promise of the ultimate meaning of human events. If you are troubled by what is going on in the world, read the book of Joel. Here is the corresponding New Testament promise of Romans 8:28: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Joel shows how God is at work among the nations, shaping events and bringing about his purposes, so that even the tragedies and the catastrophes which befall us are part of the warp and woof of the fabric of history that God is weaving.

The book of **Amos** is the book of the promise of perfection, corresponding to that glorious promise in Jude :24, "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing..." The message of the book of Amos is that God will never let down his standards. We want him to. We say: "Lord, I have grown. I am so much better than I was ten years ago that it amazes even me. Don't you think I've gone far enough now? Just let me stay here." But Amos comes along and says: "No. God will never be content with this, will never rest, will never give up until he has brought you through to the absolute perfection

of Jesus Christ.” The plumb line of God is the great theme of Amos.

Obadiah is the promise of spiritual victory. It is the story of two men, Jacob and Esau, who, respectively, are the symbols of walking in the Spirit and walking in the flesh. Any of us who have felt at times as though we wanted to reach inside our hearts, take hold of this evil that dwells in our flesh and tear it out by the roots will find encouragement in the book of Obadiah. This book is the equivalent of the New Testament promise in Romans 6:14: “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” This is the book which declares that the flesh is always a failure, but that the Spirit will always triumph: We

walk in the Spirit; we shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. The book ends with these marvelous words, which I hope are true of every one of us as we walk with the Lord:

**... the kingdom shall be the Lord's. {Ob
1:21 RSV}**

This is what we want in our lives, isn't it? The kingdom of our lives shall be the Lord's. We ourselves know best of all how difficult this is and how much we are fighting this in God's program. We ourselves are the greatest obstacles to our lives becoming the Lord's kingdom. But God has a way around that, too. The book of Obadiah is the promise of that victory.

Things Surely to be Believed, Part 2

by Ray C. Stedman

In the last few years I have come to learn to love the Old Testament as much as the New, and it has done as much to change my life as anything I have discovered in the New. The secret is that the two complement each other. This is one of the marks which prove that this book comes from the hand of God. Forty authors, writing over the course of sixteen hundred years, without collusion have produced a book which fits together in absolutely perfect harmony, dovetailing in every detail. This harmony, of course, is far beyond the ability of man to produce. It marks God's hand upon this book.

The Old Testament is the part of the Bible which prepares us for the truth we get in the New Testament. And, as we have seen in the course of this survey of the Bible, the whole purpose of revelation is to mature us, to perfect us, to make us grow up. It is to make us become what God intended us to be in Jesus Christ – to enable us to discover all the potential of our manhood or womanhood in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we desperately need the whole book.

The prophets in the Old Testament are the expounders of the mighty promises of God. What would we be without the promises of God? Someone has counted more than three thousand promises in the Bible which are intended to be fulfilled in this life. They have nothing to do with the life to come; those promises are another category. Three thousand promises are made for us today. How many have you claimed? They are intended to be fulfilled now.

A promise, as we saw in our last study, is an offer of self. When we promise someone something, we are expressing a willingness to give them a part of ourselves – our time, our interests, our sympathy – whatever it may be. So when God makes a promise he is promising himself, commit-

ting himself. All these promises, then, come out of the character of God. Therefore, each of the prophets was given the task of expounding some vast and wonderful side of God's character, so that we might rest upon it and claim it and know that God will act this way. A study of the promises reveals how God acts and what he is like. This is why the book of Hebrews begins with this great statement:

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; {Heb 1:1 RSV}

Of course it goes on to say,

but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, {Heb 1:2a RSV}

But all of this is so that we might know God.

Now, what do you do with a promise? Well, you either believe it or reject it. There are no alternatives. You might say, "Well, I'll just ignore it." But then you are rejecting it, because a promise is a demand for commitment. The easiest form of reaction is to simply walk away from it – but that is a rejection, isn't it? So promises must either be believed or they must be rejected. That is why we have called this pair of studies: *Things Surely to be Believed*.

We have already seen the promises set forth in the first eight books of the prophetic section. Now we will look at the last eight, beginning with perhaps the best known of the minor prophets. (*Minor* here means smaller in size, not lesser in importance.)

Who is that? **Jonah** – and the fish story! This is the book which is the butt of more ridicule, the object of more censure, than perhaps any other

book in the Old Testament, because it contains the remarkable story of how Jonah was swallowed by the fish. But, as someone has pointed out, this is an encouraging book: if you are ever down-in-the-mouth, remember Jonah – he came out all right! However, the message of Jonah is not a fish story. It is the promise of a second chance. God said to Jonah, as recorded in Chapter 3, Verse 1:

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, {Jonah 3:1 RSV}

This is why the book of Jonah is such an encouragement to faith – because it shows God’s patience with man; God’s willingness to give us another chance, and yet another chance, and still another chance. It is a book which reveals the stubbornness of men’s hearts sometimes. Jonah, as we know, was called by God to go to the great city, Nineveh, and to declare its judgment. He refused to go; he ran in the other direction. But God gave him a second chance; and after he was coughed up on the beach by the fish, he decided to obey God and went to Nineveh. He declared God’s message to the city: “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” {Jonah 3:4b RSV} – a vast city of over 112,000 inhabitants. But Nineveh repented, and God gave it a second chance. Nineveh was not destroyed at this time, simply because it repented.

This is the great message of the patience of God – the promise of a second chance.

The prophet **Micah** was a contemporary of Isaiah. They both ministered to the Southern Kingdom – Judah. Someone has called the book of Micah “Isaiah in shorthand.” Micah summarizes many of the predictions and prophecies and even uses some of the very wording of the book of Isaiah. These two men worked together, so this is not to be wondered at. The message of Isaiah, you remember, is the promise of a new beginning. Micah’s is the promise of God’s pardon. Micah, by the way, is the favorite Old Testament book of liberals because of Chapter 6, Verse 8 – that famous verse quoted by Adlai Stevenson as his favorite in the Bible:

**and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?
{Micah 6:8b RSV}**

This seems to the liberals to sum up God’s entire requirement of man; and it is true – it does. This is what God does require of man – that he do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with his God. But who can do this? That is the point.

The obvious message of Micah is that you can’t do this until you have received the pardon of God – until you have come in dependence and have received his life. Only the life of God can fulfill the requirements of Micah 6:8. So this is the book of pardon.

The brief book of the prophet **Nahum** is the prediction of the destruction of Nineveh. The books of Jonah and Nahum go together. At Jonah’s preaching, the great city repented – from the king down to the lowest street cleaner. Because of that repentance the city was spared, and God turned back the judgment which he had said would fall within forty days of Jonah’s preaching. But a hundred years later Nahum issued his prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh, and it was fulfilled to the letter. Nahum predicted the city would be destroyed by the opening of the river gates which would allow an enemy to come in. This is exactly the way the judgment did fall upon Nineveh, some fifty years later. A hundred years after Jonah’s prediction of promised ultimate judgment – after the exercise of his patience. This is the promise: God does not change; he does exactly what he says he will do. He does not forget, nor does he grow weary in the passing of time, nor does he change his mind. He reserves his judgment whenever there is repentance, but if there is no repentance – or if there is repentance from the repentance, as in the case of Nineveh – God’s judgment still falls. This is the unswerving character of God expressed in Nahum.

In some ways, the most interesting of the minor prophets is **Habakkuk**. I hope you will get acquainted with Habakkuk. This is a marvelous book, for here you have the answer to the eternal question: “Why?” Why does God let injustice prevail? Why does he allow the nations to run rampant over the poor and the downtrodden and the unoffending?

This is the book where the prophet is faced with the silence of God, and it looks as though God is doing nothing when the situation cries out for God to do something. In his agony the prophet

calls out, “Why?” This book becomes the promise of ultimate answers. God finally answers the prophet, and his response is very remarkable. His first answer makes Habakkuk even more bewildered and more upset. But finally there comes the answer which satisfies his heart.

If you are troubled with this great question Why? I suggest you study the prophet Habakkuk.

This book, by the way, was the basis of the Protestant Reformation. It is in this book that the phrase occurs which struck fire in the heart of Martin Luther and set in motion the wheels of the Reformation: “the just shall live by his faith” (2:4b KJV).

This book is the basis of three New Testament books – Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In each of these books this phrase is quoted: “The just shall live by faith.” There is an emphasis peculiar to each. In Romans the emphasis is on “the just;” in Galatians it is on “shall live;” and in Hebrews it is on “by faith.” These books tie together beautifully in this way.

One of the shortest of the books is that by the prophet **Zephaniah**. Yet it is a book which is almost overwhelming in its darkness and gloom. The theme of this book is “the day of the Lord.” It is a view of the back side of God’s love – in other words, his wrath. It is a book which sets forth the burning jealousy of God.

The Bible frequently says that God is a jealous God. That doesn’t mean jealousy as we usually think of it – being suspicious all the time and looking for expected violations of love. It simply means that God loves so thoroughly, so completely, that he cannot brook a rival to his love. God will destroy anything which hurts his loved one. This is why he is sometimes so ruthless with us. When he sees us loving and clinging to things which are damaging and hurting us, God’s jealousy comes in and says, “No, you can’t have them.” We plead with him and say, “Lord, let me keep them. Why, this friend I have – I enjoy him so, or love her so! Let me keep her; let me have him.” And God says, “No, you can’t.” So we have to give these things up.

This book sets forth the jealousy of God. There could be no love on God’s part if there were not the ultimate exercise of wrath. You say you can’t accept a God of wrath? Then you can’t believe in a God of love, because a God who can’t get

angry at what injures the person he loves is not capable of love. Zephaniah is the great prophet of God’s jealousy.

The last three books of the Old Testament are those of the prophets who wrote after the Babylonian captivity. All the others prophesied before Israel and Judah went into captivity. The last three were the prophets after the exile – Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – interestingly enough, these three prophets prophesied at the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, so we have the historical section closing during the same time as the prophetic section.

The book of **Haggai** is the promise of material blessing. It reveals the link between the physical and the spiritual. Haggai was the prophet to the people who had forgotten God. They had abandoned the building of the Temple while they had been busy building their own houses and fixing up everything for themselves. Haggai was sent to remind them that men who do this are like the foolish people who killed the goose that laid the golden egg. All their material prosperity was directly related to their willingness to have God be central in their affairs. If they didn’t begin to put God first, all their material prosperity would fade. This is the promise, then, of God’s essentiality: We must have him in the center of our life, because our physical and material well-being can never be fully realized apart from God.

Zechariah is one of the most interesting books of the Old Testament. It is sometimes called *the apocalypse* of the Old Testament. “The Apocalypse” is another name for the book of “The Revelation.” Zechariah is ‘The Revelation’ of the Old Testament, because it has very much the same features. It begins with a vision of horsemen riding out to patrol the earth, and it ends with a magnificent vision of the coming of the glory of God – the second coming of Jesus Christ. We get the specific, literal prediction in this book that the Lord’s feet shall stand on the Mount of Olives, and that the mountain shall be split in half and a great valley formed. This is where the judgment of the nations will take place. So it is a book which is very closely related to the book of The Revelation. Its message is the promise of encouragement – of the comfort of God. This is the book for dark days. If

you are wondering how things are going to turn out, if it looks as though God is being defeated, read the book of Zechariah. There is mighty reassurance here.

The last book of the Old Testament is **Malachi**. These four brief chapters give the promise of God's responsibility. Again, this is an encouraging book, because it reveals God's answer to man's failure due to his blindness. It begins with God's asking Israel a number of questions. To each one Israel responds, "What? Why? Who – us? What are you talking about?" They are utterly blind to what God is saying:

- He says, "You have robbed me." They say, "Wherein?"
- "You have failed to honor me." "Wherein?"

This is probably one of the most discouraging conditions of mankind. Have you ever gotten into this state?

- Has it ever struck you that it seems as if you are made responsible for your own spiritual welfare?
- And have you ever come to the place where you have felt tremendously depressed and have said, "Well, if it depends on me, I'll never make it. I am so blind that I don't even know when I am wrong. How can I possibly make it if I don't even see the things in my life which are wrong?"

Malachi is a great book for that condition, because it shows God's answer to the blindness of the heart. It shows that ultimately it is God's responsibility to break through that blindness and dark-

ness and indifference, and to bring us again to the light.

The book closes with a magnificent view of the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, preceded by John the Baptist, and of what that coming would mean. Then it skips over to his second coming – the dawning of the Sun of righteousness, who comes with healing in his wings finally to bring God's vision of glory to the earth.

In the New Testament, in First Thessalonians 5, the Apostle Paul prays (Verse 23b):

... may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23b RSV}

And you say, "How can it be?" The answer is in the next verse:

He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. {1 Th 5:24 RSV}

This is the message of Malachi.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, we pray that our eyes may be opened to see great and mighty truths in this living Word. Teach our hearts to be hungry for it. Help us to know that it is very essential to life: that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. The reason some of us have not really been living, but merely existing, is that we haven't been willing to listen to your Word. Give us that willingness, Father. Break through our indifference and bring us to a vital, living, trusting faith which lays hold of you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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Four Faces of Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

In our survey of the Scriptures we come now to the New Testament. When we came to the close of the Old Testament we were aware that a large portion of the prophetic sections is at least partially unfulfilled. Also, many of the sacrifices are not explained to us in the Old Testament. Thus, it is a book of unfulfilled prophecy and unexplained sacrifice. We discovered, further, that it is a book of unsatisfied longings. Men were crying out for God. In Psalm 42 David said, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." And you find the heart cry of Job reflected on the lips of many men in the Old Testament: "Oh, that I knew where I might find him!"

When we turn to the pages of the New Testament we instantly begin to read about the One who comes in fulfillment of the prophecies, as an explanation of the sacrifices and in satisfaction of the longings which are there. The Lord Jesus Christ, of course, is that One. We have in the four Gospels the picture of the Person of Christ.

Now, it is improper to think of these four Gospels as four biographies of Christ. They are not. We do not have a biography of the Lord Jesus Christ in print anywhere today. It simply doesn't exist. John says, "There are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written...the world itself could not contain the books that would be written," (John 21:15). And there certainly is no other record of him anywhere else. But we do have these four portraits – four penned pictures of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many have asked, "Why is it necessary to have four Gospels? Why don't we have just one Gospel? Why couldn't one of these writers have gotten all the facts together and presented them for us?" Well, that would be like trying to make one photograph of a building adequately represent the entire structure. It would be impossible to take a picture which would show all four sides of the building at

one time. It is impossible to get a full, four-dimensional view of a house without having four different pictures. Similarly it is impossible to get a full, four-dimensional view of the Person of Christ without portraying his four fundamental aspects. There are many features which are similar, or the same, in these four Gospels, but the writers were not trying to do the same thing. In fact, there is a distinct aspect of Christ set forth in each of the four Gospels. We find a different portrait of Christ in each one. We have no conception of the fullness of his Person until we have seen all four of these. You can't get a clear, well-rounded picture of Christ until you have all four Gospels in view.

I think it would have been possible for a keen-minded, farsighted Hebrew to have foreseen from the Old Testament the fact that some day there would have to be four Gospels. I don't know that any ever did, but, now that we have these four, we can look back into the Old Testament and see anticipation provided by the Spirit of God that some day there would be given a fourfold picture of Christ. The Old Testament is filled with pictures of the coming Messiah. Take the book of Isaiah, for example. In its opening pages we sense at first a dim, shadowy portrait of someone in the background. As we move along in the book it grows clearer, until we come to the fortieth chapter; and from then on, the figure of the Messiah steps out into full glory. He fills the entire horizon of the book. We have there a picture of Christ second to none in all the Bible. There are many pictures of the Lord in the Old Testament, but all of them and all of the anticipations and prophecies can be categorized under four aspects of Christ – even in the Old Testament:

First, our Lord Jesus is pictured in many prophecies, like those of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah, as coming as the King – the King of Israel. And, of course, the nation of Israel has

loved that kind of a picture. That is the portrait they built up in their minds. And this is one of the basic reasons why Israel rejected the Lord when he did come. It is the answer to the question which is often asked: "Why did the Jews not know their Messiah when he came?" They had only one of his aspects in mind. They seized upon this idea of his coming as a great, triumphant Redeemer and King and Mighty One, moving against the nations who were their enemies. When he didn't do that, they felt he wasn't the One. There are prophecies that speak of it.

Second, we have other Old Testament pictures which speak of Messiah as the Servant, as the suffering One. Again, Isaiah is in the fore-view. There is also the typological fore-view that Joseph gives of the coming of One who is to suffer. The Hebrews were confused by these two kinds of pictures that many of the rabbis say in their writings that there must be two Messiahs. They called one "Messiah Ben-joseph," or Messiah the son of Joseph, and the other "Messiah Ben-david," or Messiah the son of David. Messiah Ben-david was said to be the kingly One, and Messiah Ben-joseph the suffering One. They didn't see even the twofold aspect of a single Messiah we have already discussed.

Third, we have frequent Old Testament pictures of Christ's coming as Man. He was to be born of a virgin, grow up in Bethlehem, walk among men. There are pictures of his childhood, youth and young manhood.

Finally, we have those pictures which speak of him as God, the Everlasting One. Micah says, "Out of Bethlehem shall come he who is to be the ruler of Israel, whose going forth is from everlasting." And there are many other pictures of him as God.

So all of these Old Testament prophecies and pictures can be placed under these four headings: King, Servant, Man, and God. When you come to the Gospels, you find that these represent exactly the fourfold way in which Christ is pictured. Interestingly enough, in four places in the Old Testament (in the King James Version) the word *behold* is used in connection with these four pictures. In Zechariah 9:9 God says to the daughters of Zion and Jerusalem, "behold, thy King cometh..." That prophecy was fulfilled when our Lord entered Jerusalem in triumph. Then in Isaiah 42:1 God says, "Behold my servant..." It is not "thy servant" but

"my servant." Christ is not the servant of man but the servant of God, of Jehovah. In Zechariah 6:12 the Lord says, "Behold, the man..." He is speaking about the Messiah. And in Isaiah 40:9 he says, "say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!" Four times that phrase is used – each time in connection with a different aspect of the Person of Christ. Thus we can see something of the marvelous pattern which underlies the Scriptures. All this was woven into the warp and woof of the Old Testament, long before Christ ever appeared on earth, and yet it forms a basis for the four Gospels which were to be written some 500 to 1000 years later.

Before we look at the four Gospels individually, it is important to recognize that it is impossible, really, for anybody to give us a true "harmony" of them, because they are not chronological accounts. So don't try to reconcile the sequence of all the different places, times and occurrences – because you can't do it. These men did not sit down and record in chronological order what Jesus did. Each was quite evidently led by the Spirit of God to present for us a picture of a certain aspect of the ministry of Christ. In order to do that, each one of these men, for example, took a message which our Lord delivered later in his ministry and recorded it earlier. Now, there is nothing deceitful about this, because they do not claim to be recording in any chronological sequence. We sometimes merely assume that – quite improperly. And we will also find that our Lord evidently delivered the same message on two or three different occasions, so it is recorded in two or three different connections. Thus, it is impossible for us to harmonize all parts of these accounts. But there is no real, underlying disharmony between them if we recognize the fact that the chronology is not absolute. However, if we carefully compare the Gospels we can derive a fairly accurate sequence – especially if we rely upon John's Gospel, which is the most chronological of them all.

Now let's take the Gospels in their order:

Matthew's Gospel, of course, is the Gospel of Christ as King. There are a number of characteristics which mark it as distinctive in this way. His effort is to depict Christ as the King of Israel. He accomplishes this right away, because the first thing he does is to give us Christ's genealogy. A genealogy is very necessary for a king. Every king is very, very careful to keep his genealogy intact so

that we can be sure he is of the royal family. Matthew traces the genealogy of the Lord Jesus back through King David to Abraham, who was the father of the nation Israel. Christ's royal genealogy is complete.

Then we notice that, throughout Matthew, our Lord speaks as King and acts as King; he speaks with authority and acts with authority. In the Sermon on the Mount he says to the people, "Moses said to you so and so, but I say to you such and such." He speaks with the authority of Moses and more. To the Jews, Moses was the great authority. Nobody had ever spoken more authoritatively than Moses, but here came One who gave additional teaching beyond what Moses said. And our Lord acts authoritatively. He dismisses the evil spirits and commands them to leave. He heals the sick, makes the blind to see. He passes judgment upon the officials of the nation as a king would do. He says, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" And, in majestic, straightforward, commanding dignity, he pronounces the rejection of the entire nation in the latter part of the book.

The key phrase of this book is "the kingdom of heaven." It occurs thirty-two times in Matthew, but only twice any place else in the New Testament. Matthew is constantly referring to the kingdom of heaven and the King. Even in his account of the birth of our Lord, Matthew says that Christ was born King of the Jews, and that when he died he was crucified as King of the Jews. In Matthew's Gospel there is no account of the ascension of Christ. Why? Well, because the King of the Jews belongs on earth. Thus, Matthew gives us a thoroughly kingly emphasis. By way of contrast, Luke doesn't say Jesus was born to be King of the Jews; he says he was born to be the Savior. Luke doesn't say Jesus was crucified because he was King of the Jews, but because he "made himself to be like God." And, of course, Luke's account of the ascension is in Chapter 1 of The Acts, here the emphasis is distinctly other than on the kingdom.

Mark, the second Gospel, pictures Christ as the Servant. We discover this immediately, because there is no genealogy at all. Who cares about the genealogy of a servant? Nobody.

I remember reading some time ago about a young man from Boston who went to Chicago to get a job. (In Boston people place great stock in

their ancestry – their genealogy, their family background.) Perhaps you have heard the little rhyme:

I am from the city of Boston,
the place of the bean and the cod,
where the Cabots speak only to Lowells,
and the Lowells speak only to God.

The young man gave as references to a prospective employer some of his friends back home. The employer wrote to them and received long letters in reply listing this young man's family tree clear back to the Mayflower. The practical-minded employer wrote back little notes that said, "Thank you for the family history and genealogy you sent, but we want to inform you we are interested in this young man not for breeding purposes but for employment!"

So, you see, no one is interested in a servant's genealogy. And in Mark's Gospel our Lord simply appears on the scene. But do you know what we get in place of a genealogy? We get credentials. That is what we are looking for in a servant, isn't it? We want to know what his credentials are. And in the first chapter of Mark we are given Christ's credentials and his references. His first reference is John the Baptist, who gives him a good character reference. And then you have the reference of his Father and the witness of the Spirit.

The key word in this Gospel is *immediately*. That is the word of a servant, isn't it? When you give a servant an order, you want it carried out immediately, not ten minutes later. "Immediately Jesus did so and so" is repeated many, many times in Mark.

Whereas Luke is filled with parables, and Matthew has a great many, there are only four parables in Mark. Each of them is a parable of service. They represent the Servant of Jehovah – the suffering Servant whom Isaiah pictures in his 53rd chapter.

And in Mark, Jesus is never called "Lord" until after the resurrection – another mark of his servanthood.

Mark 13:32 is a verse which has puzzled many. Our Lord says of his second coming:

"But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." {Mark 13:32 RSV}

Men have wondered how Jesus could be omnipotent God and still not know the time of his own coming. But this is explained by the character of Mark's Gospel. As John tells us, "the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth." Even the Son, in his Servant aspect, does not know when he is returning. So Mark gives us the picture of the suffering Servant of Jehovah.

Luke gives us the picture of Christ as Man. Here he is seen in the perfection of his manhood – the glory, beauty, strength, and dignity of his manhood. And, as we would expect, Luke also begins with Christ's genealogy. If Jesus is to be presented as Man, we want to know that he belongs to the human race, don't we? Notice to whom Luke traces his genealogy – clear back to Adam. He thus links him directly with our race.

In Luke we find most of the references having to do with Christ praying. If you want to see Jesus at prayer, read the Gospel of Luke. Prayer is a picture of man's proper relationship to God – dependence upon a sovereign, omnipotent God. That is why you see Christ in the act of prayer many, many times throughout the Gospel of Luke.

In Matthew 10, when Jesus sends the disciples out, he tells them, "Don't go into any of the towns of the Gentiles but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But when he sends them out in Luke 9, they go everywhere to preach the gospel. This is indicative that here he has in view the entire human race. In Luke you have the reflection of his human sympathy. He wept over the city of Jerusalem; he healed the man whose ear Peter had cut off when they arrested Jesus in the garden. No other Gospel tells us about these two incidents. But Luke gives us the sympathetic, human aspect of our Lord.

In Luke we also have the fullest account of Christ's agony in the garden of Gethsemane. There he sweats blood as he enters into the sorrows of humanity. That is our Lord as a man, feeling our own infirmities, entering into our trials, being tempted as we are. Luke gives us this picture all the way through his Gospel.

Then, **John's Gospel** presents Christ as God. This great book is much used today, because it is the deity of our Lord which is questioned. John's Gospel, more than any other, is given out in evan-

gelistic work, because the key question people have is: "Is Jesus Christ really the Son of God?"

- Matthew answers the question "Is Jesus of Nazareth the King of Israel?" He says, "Yes," and he shows us why. He demonstrates Christ's legal and hereditary rights to the throne.
- Mark answers the question "Is Jesus Christ the servant of Jehovah?" He says, "Yes."
- Luke answers the question "Is Jesus Christ a true man?" He says, "Yes."
- John answers the question "Is Jesus Christ the Son of God?" His answer, of course, is a very positive "Yes!"

In John's Gospel we find only a brief genealogy. Three of the Gospels begin with a genealogy – Matthew, Luke and John. But it is a very brief one in John because it is the account of Christ's divine nature. This genealogy is encompassed in only one verse:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

That's all it takes! We have only two persons in this genealogy – the Father and the Son.

Have you ever noticed that in the Gospel of John there is not a single word about Jesus' sweat and agony in the garden of Gethsemane? What is the reason for that? Well, it is because the Son of God does not enter into the suffering as the Son of man does. Of course it is the same person, but John leaves that account out because it doesn't fit into the picture he is drawing of Christ.

In John's Gospel, however, we find the only place where we are told that when the temple soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the garden, he asked them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered, "Jesus of Nazareth." And he stepped forward and said to them, "I AM he." And they fell backward in amazement when he used that divine name of God – that name which the Hebrews did not dare pronounce. Seven times in John's Gospel Jesus

claims to be God by the use of that name, “I AM”

–

- “I AM the bread of life” (6:35, 48);
- “I AM the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5);
- “I AM the door” (10:9);
- “I AM the good shepherd” (10:11);
- “I AM the resurrection and the life (11:25);
- “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6);
- “I AM the true vine” (15:1).

John waits until the end of Chapter 20 to state his purpose in writing his Gospel – no doubt hoping that, by the time a person has read this far, the purpose already will have been accomplished:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

The book of **Acts** is a tremendously fascinating and interesting book. A number of years ago Canon Brian Greene spoke at Stanford University, and I went over to hear him. He told a story that I have remembered ever since:

An American, an Englishman and an Irishman were visiting Rome together, and they were taken on a tour of various points of interest throughout the city. Their guide took them to a section of Vatican City and showed them a chicken yard. In one pen was a hen which, the guide said, was a descendant of the rooster that crowed when Peter denied the Lord – a very interesting historical personage! The three visitors regarded this chicken in characteristic fashion. The American asked, “How much can I buy it for?” The Englishman exclaimed, “My word! Could you tell me how many generations have elapsed between these?” But the Irishman was very practical; he asked, “Does it lay any eggs?” You see, he was interested in apostolic success!

That is exactly what we have in the book of Acts – a tremendous record of apostolic success. Frankly, I don’t see how anyone can pick up the book of Acts – reading in any of our modern versions with an open, ready, eager mind – and be able to lay it down before finishing it. It moves so rapidly and is so exciting that I think it is one of the

most captivating books ever written. And Sir William M. Ramsay, the great British archaeologist, said that Luke, the writer of the book, is the most accurate historian who ever lived. So we have a book that is accurate history plus exciting adventure.

Acts constantly shouts triumph, from end to end. But this very apostolic success occasions considerable danger in the study of this book. It is always true that anyone or anything that is successful is bound to be imitated. The trouble with people who imitate, though, is that they almost invariably imitate faults instead of virtues. When I was a student at Dallas Theological Seminary each of us had to take a turn at preaching while the other students listened and evaluated. It was a very difficult time for all. I noticed that I could tell with whom certain individuals had been associated by the way they talked. Some of the young men had come from Bob Jones College, and they would stand on one leg, lean over the pulpit, and shout and wave their arms – just like Bob Jones! Others had been associated with the Young Life Campaign, and they would stand with their hands in their pockets or they would gesture with a closed fist and talk with a drawl – just like Jim Rayburn! They imitated them, but largely they imitated their faults rather than their virtues. And all too often people have imitated the weak points of the activities of the apostles and the Church recorded in Acts, because of a superficial analysis of the book.

We couldn’t understand the New Testament if we took this one book out. When we come to the close of the four Gospels we have learned that the apostles have been sent to only one nation – Israel. We also know that our Lord is risen, but that is all we know. And if we leave out the book of Acts and skip to the Epistles of Paul, we find that, instead of twelve apostles (or eleven) preaching only to Israel, we have an additional apostle, Paul, and Christians going out everywhere – to all the known world. And we find them talking, not about a kingdom, but about a new organization – the Church. All of this finds its root in the book of Acts. We wouldn’t know what had happened if it weren’t for this book.

Acts is a transitional book in the sense that it gives us the record of the way God moved in the minds and hearts of men to found and establish the Church and begin its great work in the world today. But it is not transitional in doctrinal sense. That is, when the Spirit of God came on the day of Pente-

cost – from that moment on in the mind of God – all the privileges and blessings and glory of belonging to the Church, the body of Christ, were true immediately. There wasn't any intermediate period. But it took a long time for men to comprehend this. Thus we find them still clinging to certain aspects of their old traditions and beliefs. Men were only slowly accepting and growing into the truth of the gospel. In that sense Acts is a transitional book.

I like to think of the book of Acts as a revolving door. A revolving door is constructed so that people can go in and go out at the same time. With most doors someone is either going in or coming out. People can't do both at the same time. But in a revolving door people can go in one side and come out the other. The book of Acts is like that – Judaism is going out and the Church is coming in. Both are in there at the same time, for a while, just as two people can be in a revolving door going in opposite directions. But don't ever try to set up housekeeping in a revolving door – it will knock you off your feet! Don't try to live in a revolving door, because it is not designed for such. Similarly, don't rely exclusively on the book of Acts for your doctrine and teaching. It is not designed for that. It is not designed to be the only book from which we get our instruction as to what to believe. It is designed to be a record of the introduction of the Church, and it is designed to stir us up and encourage us and bless us, and to show us what God can do and intends to do through the Church. But it is not primarily a book for doctrine.

The key to really understanding this book is the realization that Acts is not a record of the apostles, as the title would lead us to believe, but it is actually acts of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice how it begins:

In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach... {Acts 1:1 RSV}

Luke is referring to the Gospel he wrote, and he says that in it he dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. In the Gospel of Luke you have the record of what the Lord Jesus began to do. But now, in Acts, Luke gives us the record of what our Lord is continuing to do. So it is the Lord who is at work throughout both books. Luke is Volume 1; Acts is Volume 2 – continued from our first in-

stallment. That is what Luke is saying here in this first verse. From the incarnation of the Lord Jesus to his ascension, you have only what he began to do on earth.

During World War II, Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain, in a stirring message broadcast around the world, announced the victories of the Allied Forces when they had swept across North Africa and were about to launch the invasion of Sicily. Churchill said of these events: "This is not the end. This is not even the beginning of the end. But it may be the end of the beginning." Now, that is what we have in the four Gospels. It is not the end of our Lord's ministry when he ascends into the heavens, as recorded in Chapter 1 of Acts. That is just the end of the beginning. But in the rest of Acts we have the beginning of the end.

The record all through the rest of this book is of Christ's activity through the instrumentalities of men and women. In John 16:7 the Lord tells the disciples. "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." And in Luke 12:50, before the cross, Jesus tells them, "I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!" That is, "How limited and shackled and fettered and bound I am until this thing be accomplished!" Well, it has been accomplished now. Our Lord is no longer fettered. He is no longer limited. He is no longer shackled. When the Spirit of God came, the omnipotence of God was let loose among men and women; and that is why we have the tremendous explosion which we call the book of Acts in our Bible.

The Holy Spirit gives us the outline of this book in a very well-known verse, Chapter 1, Verse 8 – our Lord's words to the disciples:

"But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;" {Acts 1:8a RSV}

That encompasses the first two chapters of the book – the coming of the Holy Spirit. And then what?

"and you shall be my witnesses ..." {Acts 1:8b RSV}

That is the rest of the book. The two great divisions are the coming of the Spirit and the witness-

ing of the Spirit. The latter division separates into several parts:

“in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” {Acts 1:8c RSV}

Thus the book is very plainly outlined for us. We have in Chapters 1 and 2 the coming of the witness – the Holy Spirit. Then from Chapter 3 through Chapter 7 we have the witnessing in Jerusalem, beginning with the story of Peter’s addresses there – preaching for the first time the gospel of the risen Christ to men and women in the very city in which he was crucified. Then, beginning in Chapter 8, we have the witness spreading into “all Judea and Samaria” – just as the Lord had said. Chapter 13 opens with the first sending out of Paul, beginning a process which carries right through to the end of Chapter 28 – and the witness has gone “to the end of the earth.” We can see how literally this outline has been fulfilled. It begins in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish nation, and it ends in Rome, the center of the Gentile world. It carries us from the limited gospel of the kingdom, at the close of the four Gospels, through the spreading of the gospel of grace to the whole world, at the close of Acts.

Finally, notice that this is the one book of the Bible which is not finished. It ends very abruptly. The last two verses say that Paul has reached Rome:

And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered. {Acts 28:30-31 RSV}

Acts leaves you right there. I never close this book without wondering to myself, “Well, what happened next?” It gives the distinct impression of being unfinished. There is a reason for this. It is because this is the biography of a living person.

I have in my library an autobiography of Dr. H. A. Ironside. It was written, naturally, while he was still alive. It ends on the same sort of note. It leaves you up in the air. You wonder what happens next. It isn’t complete. His life hadn’t ended.

You see, if Acts is the record of the life of Jesus Christ worked out through individual men and women, it is unfinished. This means that men and women are still writing the book of Acts today. It is not finished yet! Men and women of God have been writing this book ever since the days of the apostles. I don’t know where the record is kept, but I am sure that it is kept in heaven somewhere. It is an account of what the Holy Spirit is doing through people in sending the gospel out to the uttermost parts of the earth.

You and I still have a share in writing this book. We haven’t seen the last page yet. It is fascinating to think about it that way, isn’t it? And yet it is true. Our names do not appear in the chapters we have here, but somewhere other chapters have been written down – and somewhere we have a chapter to write!

Prayer:

Our Father, how we thank you for your truth! We pray that we will be diligent students of it, seeking out its depths. And may we especially be concerned about our own relationship with your Holy Spirit, so that we may move into the fullness of Christ, and not dabble in the shallows. We want to be trusty, faithful servants in this day and age, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.

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Christ in You

by Ray C. Stedman

The purpose of revelation is nothing less than the transformation of human lives. Your contact with the Bible should be changing you. If it isn't, then something is drastically wrong with the way you are going about it, for this is a living book with a living message which, when it touches human life, begins to transform it and make it over. Now, it takes the entire book to do the whole job, and this is why we have been taking a quick survey through the entire Bible – in order that we might see what it has to say and how it says it.

We have seen that the purpose of the Old Testament was preparation, and that of the New Testament is fulfillment – or realization, if you want to make it rhyme! In the New Testament, the Gospels and The Acts go together to give us a presentation of the Person of Jesus Christ. That is the great theme of those five books. The four Gospels are God's inspired image of Jesus Christ as he is. The Acts is a historical record of the proclamation of this wonderful, magnificent personality among the sons of men throughout all the earth. These books are designed to teach us and instruct us in the one Person who is able to transform our lives. Of course, the entire Bible is about Christ, but particularly in the Gospels and The Acts you find him stepping out of the shadows as a living, breathing man, in whose life we see all the character of God manifested in terms of human personality.

When we come to the Epistles – which occupy the largest part of the New Testament – we are dealing not with preparation or presentation, but with explanation. These letters of the New Testament are intended and designed to make clear to us all that is involved in the mystery of Christ. If you don't think Christ is a mystery, I suggest you spend some time meditating on his Person. There are depths and heights in Jesus Christ which no mind

can grasp. The purpose of the Epistles is to present Christ on such a kindergarten level of truth that we may understand, lay hold of, and enter into his life. They do this beautifully.

There are three groups of Epistles. The first four – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians – are grouped together around the theme “Christ in you,” i.e., “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” as Paul phrases it in Colossians 1:27. This is the transforming principle of the Christian life. This is what makes us different, if we are different at all, from any other human beings on earth – Christ in you. These four Epistles develop this theme.

The next group consists of nine Epistles – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. These all gather around the theme “you in Christ,” i.e., your life lived in relationship to the rest of the body of Christ. Here you have the church coming into view – the fact that we no longer live our Christian lives as individuals; that we are not just so many people struggling along trying to lay hold of Jesus Christ, but that we do it together. More and more I am becoming aware that this togetherness is absolutely essential. I cannot ever lay hold of all that Jesus Christ ought to be to me unless you do it with me. You can't either, without me. We need each other. This is set forth in these nine Epistles.

Then comes the last group of eight Epistles – Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2 and 3 John, and Jude. These all gather around one great theme – the method of life in Christ, which is “faith” – how to walk by faith. When you have comprehended that, you have said all there is to say about how to live in Christ.

So we have this great span of Epistles, designed to make all the mighty truth which is so gripping, so captivating, so compelling in the Gospels available to us in terms of practical experience. This is exactly what they are for.

Notice that the order in which I have listed the Epistles is the order in which they appear in our New Testament. They were not written in that order. Romans was not the first letter written, by any means; I rather think it was either the letter to the Galatians or the first one to the Thessalonians. But I am confident that their present arrangement in our New Testament was compiled under the oversight of the Holy Spirit, for in each group the Epistles follow a definite pattern which takes us from foundational, fundamental letters right on through to the detailed development and application of the basic theme of each group. There are three groups, and there are three fundamental Epistles. If you want to grasp in brief compass what the letters of the New Testament teach us, spend your time in these three fundamental Epistles. Get to know them. Master them. For here the great truth of God is crystallized – focused – in three basic areas. The rest of the letters simply develop even more profoundly the truths which are set forth in these three. The three are Romans, Ephesians and Hebrews.

In this study we survey the first group – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians.

Romans is THE great foundational letter of the New Testament. In this book you find the full sweep of salvation from beginning to end, in all its fullness. If you want to see what God is doing with you as an individual, and with the human race as a whole, master the book of Romans.

As you read this book you discover that it develops salvation in three tenses – past, present and future. Or:

- I *was* saved when I believed in Jesus;
- I *am being* saved as the character of Jesus Christ now becomes manifest in my life; and
- I *shall be* saved when at last, in resurrection life, with a glorified body, I stand in the presence of the Son of God and enter into the fullness of the truth of God manifest in the ages of

ages which stretch out unendingly into eternity to come.

These three tenses of salvation can be gathered up in three words which are very familiar to those who have studied the Bible to any extent:

- *Justification* is the first word – the past tense – I was justified when I believed in Jesus Christ. Justification is that righteous standing by which a man is found in the presence of God without spot – just as if he had never sinned.
- The second word – the present tense – is that much misunderstood and abused word – *sanctification*. Oswald Chambers said, “Sanctification is the appearing of the characteristics, the perfections, of the Lord Jesus in terms of your human personality.” That is a pretty good definition of sanctification. It is a glowing, growing, wonderful process taking place in your life by which you become more and more Christ-like – which is another way of saying that you become more of a man or a woman.
- *Glorification* – the future tense – of course, is the completion of this transformation when we stand in the presence of Christ.

Romans develops the theme of salvation in this way and then illustrates it – in Chapters 9 through 11 – out of the history of the great illustrative nation, the picture nation – Israel. Finally, it applies salvation in the various areas of life – first of all in individuals, then in the body of Christ and the whole realm of civil government, and then reaching out into the rest of society.

In **1 Corinthians** we find the practical correction of the tendency to carnality by the understanding of the principles of spirituality. Carnality and spirituality are the two divisions of this book. First, the carnality: If you have read 1 Corinthians you know what I mean. What a mess! Here were people divided up into little schisms and factions and cliques, at each other’s throats, dragging each other before courts of law, gossiping, fighting with one another, even getting drunk at the Lord’s Table, and busying themselves with chitchat about

philosophical systems while the most hateful forms of immorality were parading themselves in full view in the Corinthian church. The theme of this Epistle is in Chapter 1, Verse 9:

God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. {1 Cor 1:9 RSV}

This is what the book of Romans sets before us as the secret of Christian life – this fellowship with Jesus Christ. And 1 Corinthians takes this theme and develops it, showing us that the lack of this fellowship causes carnality; but its presence brings us over into spirituality, where we walk in resurrection power and resurrection life.

Then, **2 Corinthians** is the practical exhibition of victory under pressure. This is the great Epistle of trials and difficulties and hardships. This is life at its rawest edge. The theme of the letter is triumph in the midst of all that. Verse 14 of Chapter 2 sets it forth:

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. {2 Cor 2:14 RSV}

The Epistle goes on to show how through the midst of perplexities, stresses, persecutions, hardships and trials, there is grace abounding. Near the end, in Chapter 12, you have this tremendous passage:

But [God] said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong. {2 Cor 12:9 RSV}

This is what Christ has come into your life to do – to make it possible for you to be strong, right where you are.

The last letter of this group, **Galatians**, is a red-hot needle by which Paul intends to jab Christians awake – stir them up a bit. This is the hottest Epistle in the New Testament, because Paul is an-

gry. He is obviously and unmistakably angry. He is deeply disgusted with the Christians in Galatia, and he doesn't hesitate to say so. He is angry because they are so easily led astray from the position of truth which they understood and knew – led off into some weakening, debilitating doctrine which is sapping their strength and turning them into carnal Christians. The theme of the letter is freedom – freedom in Christ. You find it in Chapter 5, Verse 1:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. {Gal 5:1 RSV}

Once we were bound with our flesh – with our carnal ideas. In our own efforts we were trying to serve God. Then Christ came and, through the Spirit, cut all these ties and set us free so that we could be real men or women and walk in the liberty that he has in mind for us. “Now,” Paul says, “for God's sake, please don't go back into that again! Stand fast in the liberty wherein Christ has set you free.” This is the answer to all the legalism from which the Church has suffered ever since – all the guilt and condemnation and weakness and frustration, all the failure of the flesh. The answer is to set forth the mighty power of the Holy Spirit at work in a human life.

I love to read the book of Galatians. This is the Epistle, by the way, that set fire to Martin Luther's soul. He used this book as a mighty weapon to cut his way through all the ritualism and the terrible burdens of legality and liturgy that the Church had heaped upon the truth of God, and to set people free. This is the great Epistle of human freedom. And as you read it you can see that there is a mighty burning in the heart of the apostle, urging Christians to break away from this ordinary, no-different-than-anybody-else kind of living, and to discover the mighty power of the Holy Spirit – like a great river – flowing through our life, cleansing it, and making us able to walk in the fullness of the Spirit of God. This is what God is after.

And as we do this we discover that if we “walk by the Spirit” we shall “not gratify the desires of the flesh,” {cf, Gal 5:16}. Our lives become literally transformed.

All this gathers around the theme “Christ in you” – the greatest theme the mind of man has ever contemplated.

Prayer:

Our Heavenly Father, thank you for this glimpse of the purpose in your heart for us. Lord, open our eyes. Make us ready to hear, ready to obey. Save us from this deathly, barren fruitlessness that plagues us and distresses us so. Teach us to walk in faith, Lord, into a mighty experience of the grace and glory of Jesus Christ, alive in us, and manifesting his life through us. For we pray in his name, Amen.

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You in Christ

by Ray C. Stedman

We have been looking together at the Scriptures, trying to gain a panoramic view of the Bible. I hope you have been following this through and checking it out in your own Bible, because that is a perfectly scriptural procedure, to check up for yourself on what any speaker says. They did that to the Apostle Paul in Berea, and he commended them for it. It is the right thing to do.

As you remember, the whole purpose of revelation, the aim of the entire Bible, the focal point of this tremendous book, is, as Paul puts it in Ephesians 4, that we might grow up – might mature – in Christ. God is not interested in forming chapters of the PWA – the Pew-Warmers Association – where people simply sit and sulk and sour. He is interested in having people grow in Christ, never staying the same but moving on. I am afraid that in too many places the theme song of Christianity is – “Come Weal or Come Woe, Our Status Is Quo.” This is what the Word of God is designed to avoid. It is aimed at keeping us walking in the Spirit. And a walk is not a sit-in. It is moving on with God.

We have already seen that the purpose of the Old Testament is to prepare us for truth. The purpose of the New Testament is to realize that truth. And in the New Testament, first of all, the four Gospels and The Acts present Jesus Christ to us. Then follow the thirteen letters of Paul. Following them we have the letter to the Hebrews and then the letters of James, Peter, John and Jude. These epistles are the explanation of Jesus Christ. We desperately need them, because here we find the answers to all the fine points of the Christian faith which puzzle us.

In our last study we looked at the first group of epistles – Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Galatians. These four letters set forth the theme “Christ in you, the hope of glory” – i.e., the lost secret of

humanity, which is God’s indwelling of man. Man is to be the vehicle of divine life. Man’s body and soul and spirit are the instruments by which God expresses himself. This is the way the invisible God becomes visible to men. This is the secret of successful living. Living on any other basis is a total failure – and will prove to be so by experience if you attempt it. Only on this basis, which is what we were designed for, and made for, do we find fulfillment. Therefore, these four epistles are vital and foundational in our Christian experience.

The next group of epistles sets forth – “you in Christ.” Remember that in John 14 the Lord Jesus used the formula “I in you and you in me,” {cf, John 14:20}. When we talk about him in us we are talking about the indwelling life – the walk in the Spirit. When we talk about us in him we are speaking of the relationship of the body of Christ – the fact that we are members of his body. Our life is incorporated in the totality of life in the body of Christ. And we soon discover that we are not only Christians individually but corporately as well. We belong to each other as well as to Christ. By ourselves, we can never come to fulfillment and full development in our Christian lives. There are times when Christians have to be isolated and cut off from fellowship with other Christians for various reasons, such as work or military circumstances. If that condition continued for a long time, though, it would doubtless result in great weakening, for we need one another. We can never be complete in Christ without sharing ourselves with each other, and this corporate life is what these epistles take up.

This group of epistles comprises Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus and Philemon.

They are like the best books in a doctor's library. Most of the books in a doctor's library aren't very interesting to a layman. This library is full of heavy tomes which have the most frightening titles. However, in any doctor's library we will also find a book on physiology – meaning the entire science and study of the makeup of the human body. Ephesians answers to that; it is the study of the nature of the body of Christ. And you will find a book on pathology – meaning the treatment of the diseases of the body and how to cure them. The book which answers to that is Philippians, the book on the treatment of the problems of the body of Christ. Then, there is a book on biology – the fundamental study of life itself, what makes the cells of the body operate as they do. You have this in the book of Colossians – a wonderfully detailed study of the body of Christ.

Let's now examine all of these epistles.

In **Ephesians** we have the nature of the body. Someone has said that there are only two things essential to living. One is light on the mystery of life, and the other is life itself in order that we may master life. Light and life – these are the themes of the letter to the Ephesians, where the body of Christ is set forth. The key to this book is found in the second chapter, Verses 19 through 22:

So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. {Eph 2:19-22 RSV}

That is the life of the body. It is made up of the foundation and the membership functioning in the unity of the Holy Spirit, and all of this letter gathers around that theme.

When we come to the letter to the **Philippians** we find that here Paul, in a very practical way, is taking up the problems and diseases which threaten the body of Christ. As we run through the list, we can see they are very frequently experienced today. There is, first of all, discouraging circumstances.

Have you found your spiritual life threatened by discouraging circumstances? Then read the epistle to the Philippians for the answer.

Second, there is the problem of divisive personalities. I often quote the little jingle:

To live above with saints we love –
Oh, that will be glory!
But to dwell below with saints we know –
Well, that's another story!

Unfortunately, it is too frequently true. In Philippi there were two ladies, among others, who were at odds with one another. We know their names – Euodia and Syntyche, or as someone has rendered them, “Odious” and “soontouchy” – “I beseech Odious and Soontouchy that they be of the same mind in the Lord.” When you have “Odious” and “Soontouchy” together in a church, you have problems! This was the case in Philippi.

Third, there is the problem of deceitful teachers – men who were going about deliberately teaching untruth, and doing it in the name of Christ. This was a problem then, and there is probably no problem more threatening to the Church of Jesus Christ today than this.

Fourth, there is the threat of destructive ambitions – seeking to exalt oneself in the name of Christ. Paul speaks of his own problem of wanting to be something in himself, but learning to say at last, “Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

Finally, there are distressing pressures so great that you wonder if Jesus Christ is adequate. But Paul says to the Philippians:

... in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me. {Phil 4:12b-13 RSV}

That is the key to this epistle.

In **Colossians** we come to the setting forth of the power of the body of Christ. What motivates the body? What force ties all Christians together? What is the answer to our continual search for overall control of the body? We are always struggling with this, aren't we? Here we are, a local church. Under God we are trying to contribute to the total ministry of Christ's body in the world.

But sometimes we get worried about the other members of the body and what they are doing, and we wonder who is keeping them straight. We are doing all right – we presume! We are right on target. But what about the others? Who is regulating the other parts of the body? We get a wonderful answer in Colossians, where we learn that this is not a headless body. This is not a headless horseman chasing an Ichabod Crane. No, this is a body with a Head, and that Head is the life of the body. As we read of the Head and see him in action, we learn that in his sovereign, authoritative direction of the body he is keeping all of it united and correlated so that it is working together to accomplish his end. The key to this is Colossians 3:3:

For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. {Col 3:3 RSV}

There is the answer to all of the problems of control in the body of Christ.

In the **Thessalonian** letters we have the hope of the body of Christ. This is a look into the future. In the first letter Paul sets forth the certainty of Christ's second coming. These people were troubled. They were wondering if some of them were not going to miss the coming of Christ, because some of their loved ones had died and they didn't know what had happened to them. The purpose of Paul's writing is to show them that Christ is coming, and that when he comes the entire Church will be together. None will be missing. And this coming is a bright and glowing hope in every Christian's heart, purifying him and leading him to walk softly and cautiously before Christ.

The second letter is largely centered around the time of Christ's coming – not in the sense of date-setting but in a relative sense, with relationship to events in the world. The key to these two letters is found in 1 Thessalonians 5, Verses 23 and 24:

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it. {1 Th 5:23-24 RSV}

In Paul's letters to **Timothy**, the young man who had accompanied him on his travels, we have the ministry of the body. Referring to a doctor's

library again, this is a study of neurology – the science of nerves. In the body of Christ you find certain men who have been specially gifted by God to act as stimulators to carry the message from the Head to the body. That is exactly how the gifted men Paul refers to in Ephesians 4 serve. Paul says Christ has given apostles, prophets, evangelists and pastors-teachers unto the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry. And here is one of them – Timothy – with special instructions on how to stimulate the body, how to mobilize its resources, how to instruct its leaders, how to correct and reprove and rebuke, where need be, and how to get the body to work. The first letter is a general teaching that covers most of the problems a young pastor would face, while the second letter is specialized instruction in view of apostasy and decline. What do you do in a church that is beginning to lose its life, where vitality is seeping away and the church is drifting into deadly formalism? The second letter of Timothy answers this question.

When you come to the epistle of **Titus** you find similar discussion of ministry, of the work of the body. Here the emphasis is not so much on the ministry of the nerves of the body as on the body itself, on what the body is supposed to do. The key to this letter is in the second chapter, Verses 11 and 12:

For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us [that is the end, you see, of the body's ministry] to renounce irreligion and worldly passions, and to live sober, upright, and godly lives in this world [not out of it; right in it], awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. {Tit 2:11-13 RSV}

When we come to the letter to **Philemon** – one of the shortest books in the Bible – we have a beautiful emphasis upon the unity of the body. This little book was occasioned by a slave who has run away from his master. He found Paul in Rome and, through the ministry of the apostle, had been led to Jesus Christ. Though he was a valuable man to Paul – ran his errands and ministered to him in many ways – Paul sent him back to his master, because he felt he had an obligation to do so and, further, because his master, Philemon, was a Christian. Paul sends this slave Onesimus, back to

Philemon and writes this letter for Onesimus to take to Philemon. In it Paul urges Philemon to receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. In Verses 15 and 16 you have what serves as a key:

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. {Phmn 1:15-16 RSV}

In this epistle, more than any other letter of the New Testament, you see that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. All distinctions between Christians are done away with in Christ. We are all brothers and sisters together. There is to be no difference in our attitudes toward one another because of any superficial distinctions of background, training, color, education, or whatever. As Jesus said, in Matthew 23, "One is your Master, and you are all brethren," {cf, Matt 23:8}. This letter, then, sets before us the unity of the body of Christ.

This is life in the body of Christ. I commend these nine epistles to you for your own study, so that you might see how to behave yourself in the church of the living God, which is the pillar and the ground of truth. It is for this purpose that these letters were written.

Prayer

Our Father, we give thanks to you for these marvelous letters which have come to us. As we open this book, O Lord, we see that its very pages are soaked with the blood of men and women who have had to die in order for us to have it. We pray, therefore, that we may treat it carefully, and read it reverently and frequently, in order that we may arrive at the understanding of the truth you have for us. We thank you for it and for the warmth and fellowship and glory of life in the body of Christ, our Lord Jesus; for we pray in his name, Amen.

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All about Faith

by Ray C. Stedman

Back in the “golden days” of radio on the Amos and Andy show, Amos once asked Andy, “Why do you have those stamps pasted to your chest?” Andy replied. “Well, those are tuberculosis stamps.” Amos asked, “What do you mean?” Andy replied, “Every year when they offer the tuberculosis stamps. I go down to the post office and buy some and paste them on my chest. And I have never gotten tuberculosis yet!”

That is an example of what many people think faith is. It is a form of faith, but it is faith on a completely unreliable, unauthorized basis. Yet the common conception of faith which prevails today is that it is a confidence in some kind of magical potion or power, and that if we could work up enough of this remarkable substance, or feeling, or whatever it is, we could do anything. Unfortunately, this widespread misconception prevails not only among non-Christians but among Christians as well.

“Faith” is a very important word in the Christian life – as is evident to anyone who reads the Bible at all. The word is found on almost every page of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation, because faith is the means by which man receives anything at all from God. Without faith, as the book of Hebrews tells us, it is simply impossible to please God. It is not difficult – it is impossible! It can’t be done. Without faith we can receive nothing from God. Without faith all the mighty promises of the Scriptures are absolutely invalid so far as we are concerned. So faith becomes a tremendous power and force to reckon with and to count upon as we consider the teachings of the Scriptures.

In this series of studies, we have been looking at the way the New Testament helps us to realize

the Person of Jesus Christ – who he is and what he does. We saw in the Gospels and the book of Acts a presentation of Christ. The epistles – the letters which follow – are the explanation of Jesus Christ. These fall into three major groups:

- The first, introduced by the book of Romans, sets forth “Christ in you, the hope of glory” – the lost secret of humanity, the way by which God intends to fulfill human life and make us able to realize all the dreams and ideals we have for ourselves as to our character, our being; all those hidden longings and thirsts of the soul, written inescapably in letters of flesh in every one of our hearts. But all this is possible only as man discovers Christ in him, the hope of glory.
- The second group, introduced by the letter to the Ephesians, sets forth the wider truth of “you in Christ” – every one of us in the body of Christ sharing together the same life. Here, of course, we have set forth for us the great truth of the Church. But none of this is of any possible help to us without our personal exercise of faith.
- So the last group of the New Testament epistles sets forth what faith is, how faith works, what faith does, why it suffers, and what it faces – all about faith – that is where we get the title for this message.

I want to introduce this subject by sharing a written comment a person handed to me recently. It reflects clearly many of the questions which have been raised on the subject of faith:

How can people really believe that God cares about them as individuals? The fundamental tenets of the Christian faith seemingly are founded upon flimsy speculations, not facts. I wish that I could believe the bases were facts; yet I find that even Christians are as torn by confusion, harassed by doubt, and pounded by conflict as the world is. In the very inner sanctuary of my own being, I long to believe. But to long to is to long in vain. The fundamental simplicity of the New Testament delights me, but it gives me no hope, no stronghold, and no joy. You announced a wonderful principle, but who among us is able to make it workable? Not I. How much can we really believe about this elusive power of love? This is the paramount problem. I am not capable of understanding nor pondering these mystical abstractions, but I try.

That is an eloquent expression of the position which many people have in regard to faith. The problem with this person, as with many of us, is that we are looking at our faith and trying to analyze it, thinking that if we can understand exactly what faith is, we somehow can produce it. Here is where the problem lies. For the strange thing about faith is that, though it is absolutely essential to experiencing anything from God, yet when you begin to examine it in your own life, it disappears. It flies out the window. You can't find it anywhere. You can't get your fingers on it. You can't pin it down. It seems impossible to define. The reason is that faith, in itself, is of no value whatsoever. In fact, it cannot even exist in itself. So the minute we try to look at it, it isn't there.

This is like the trick of trying to grab your thumb with the same hand. Have you ever tried that? Hold your thumb up and grab it before it disappears. I have never been able to do it, though I have tried for years – ever since I was a little boy. That is like trying to analyze faith.

The reason for this is that faith is produced only as we set our eyes upon the facts on which it rests. When we look at the facts, faith comes very naturally. The amazing thing is that the easiest thing in all the world for a human being to do is to believe. Over and over and over I hear these words – I have heard them for thirty years or more – they are the most widespread excuse for people either not being Christians or, having been Christians, not appropriating anything from Christ: “I just can't

believe.” But that is the one thing that human beings, by their very nature, are constituted to do. The proof of this is found in the first of the great epistles on faith, the letter to the Hebrews, in a very well known passage in the eleventh chapter – the Westminster Abbey of Scripture, the Hall of the Heroes of Faith – Verse 6:

And without faith it is impossible to please him [God]. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. {Heb 11:6 RSV}

In other words, that is the minimum level of faith. That is the one thing necessary for human life, for the development of human fulfillment – in other words, for salvation. If we do not draw near to God we cannot be saved. Therefore, if faith is not possible to any human being, he is outside the bounds of salvation and redemption. But this is not true. Every human being can believe. That is what he is made for. Human nature is made to believe. We were made to be dependent creatures. We were made to be continually drawing upon another's resources. We are continually relying on something else. That is belief. Thus, the one characteristic which we have as human beings is the capacity to believe. We automatically do it. All day long we are believing. If you are sitting in a chair, you believe it will continue to hold you up. If you are under a roof, you believe it is adequately supported and is not going to crumble and fall on you. All through our life we are continually, unendingly believing. Therefore, faith is the most automatic response of the human spirit.

The problem, you see, is that we need to fix our attention upon facts, because the process of human activity always follows the same channel, no matter what realm of life is involved. It is impossible for us to prove anything completely before we experience it. Therefore, the idea some people advance – that they are not going to believe until they see the proof of Christian faith – is totally ridiculous, because it is simply impossible to prove any fact without experiencing it. Apart from experience there is nothing we can prove, even to our own satisfaction. All we can do is come to as good an evaluation by reason as we possibly can, and then plunge in and try it – test it, leap out on it, put

our weight upon it. This we do continually all day long. This is the process of believing.

When we come to the epistles about faith, we find this same process is followed. In the letter to the **Hebrews**, the subject is “What Is Faith?” It is illustrated positively for us in the Old Testament through the lives of Moses, Joshua, Melchizedek and Aaron. And the negative is brought forth as well, so that we see what faith is not, and what the results of not believing are. As we work through this letter we discover that faith is simply an awareness that there exist certain invisible realities which we cannot perceive with our five senses, but which we are nevertheless convinced exist by the evidence brought before us. After we have come to a certain level of knowledge concerning these facts, we are expected then to test them and try them. Our only other alternative is to draw back. The whole book of Hebrews is written to warn us what happens if we draw back and don’t make the test, don’t take the plunge – won’t take it. All through this letter warnings are interspersed about what happened when men drew back after they had had all the evidence they needed that a fact existed upon which they could rest their faith.

When you come to the eleventh chapter, you have the great record of men and women who did exercise faith. And they always did it in rather simple terms. There is nothing very dramatic about them. Only a few of them are what we would call “leaders of men,” or “outstanding” characters. Many of them are obscure personalities – common, ordinary people, like you and me. But in every case they were aware of certain facts which were propounded to them, but which they could not prove completely. Nobody could. But they finally became so convinced by the evidence being presented to them that they were willing at least to venture, to put it to the test. Over and over that is the story of the eleventh chapter; e.g., Verse 8:

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. {Heb 11:8 RSV}

He couldn’t prove where he was going. But, having received the word which he could not deny came from God – certain evidence which was over-

powering to him, which he had at least to accept as being there, and undeniable – he ventured out upon the call. And the journey took him into the experience by which all that had been promised became available to him. That is all that faith is. We strengthen our faith not by looking at it but by concerning ourselves again with the facts upon which faith must rest.

That is why the Scripture says, “... faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God,” (Rom 10:17 {KJV}). The word of God has a quality about it that awakens faith. That is the amazing thing about this book. As you read it through and reread it and study it and think about it and meditate upon it, there comes a quiet conviction to the heart, “This must be true!” This is the basis upon which faith then is invited to act.

There also comes with faith, immediately, a doubt. All of us experience this. There is nothing wrong with it, nothing abnormal about it. We say, “Yes, this must be true.” And then a voice says, “Ah, yes, but maybe it isn’t, too.” So we are put in the place where we can have no further evidence until we venture. Faith is simply that willingness to venture – to reckon upon what God has said, to step out upon it. And then the answer comes, the proof follows, invariably. That is the entire record of Scripture.

Now, I have dwelt upon the subject of faith at length in order to help us see more clearly what faith is as we go through these epistles. Faith, as the book of Hebrews tells us, is “the assurance of things hoped for” – what you long to be, what you long to see in your life – based upon “the conviction of things not seen,” {Heb 1:1 RSV}. What brings you to that conviction? Simply the remarkable quality about the word of God that rings a bell in our hearts and says, “This is true;” that is all.

We have, of course, the evidence of those who have ventured before us and have given testimony to us that what they ventured upon was found trustworthy. That is what Hebrews 12:1 means: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses ...” They are all talking to us, telling us, “Come on in – the water’s fine! It works. Try it and see.” We are continually being exhorted to venture out in faith.

So don’t try to examine your faith to see how much or how little you have. Look at the facts. Look at what Scripture says is true. Read it again and again. Study it. Think it through. Meditate

upon it. As you do, there comes – gradually sometimes, or sometimes suddenly – that awareness: “Well, it is worth a venture anyway. Let’s try it. It sounds as if it might work.” Then you venture, and when you do you have the fact. Then you have the proof. That is the message of Hebrews.

The epistle of **James** is a practical book. James was a brother of our Lord in the flesh, a half brother. Yet the amazing thing about the letter of James – and the letter of Jude, who was also a half brother of our Lord -- is that there is no reflection of the human relationship with Christ here at all. Interestingly enough, neither James nor Jude inherited any of the mantle of Christ. This isn’t a family affair. Jesus was the Son of God, and they came to recognize him as such. But they had no positions of privilege or power because of their relationship to him. In his letter, James sets forth for us what faith does. The key to the letter is found in Chapter 2, Verse 26 – that well-known verse:

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead. {Jas 2:26 RSV}

All that James is telling us is that it really isn’t faith until you have ventured. That is what he is saying. We are so prone to say. “Well, yes, I do believe that such and such is true, but don’t ask me to try it or to do anything on that basis.” We call that faith, but it is not faith. It is not faith for me to say, “I know that chair will hold me.” I can stand here all night and say, “I know that chair will hold me. I believe that it will. I have confidence that it will. I am certain that it will.” But that is not faith. It is only mental conviction. Faith is when I go over and sit down on it. This is what James is saying. It is not faith until you have tried it, until you have ventured on it. Faith that does not venture, he says, is dead.

Therefore, when faith does venture, it will accomplish certain things:

- First of all, it will stand up under temptation.
- Second, it will not show respect for persons.
- Third, it will be kind and responsive to the needs of those round about.

- Fourth, it will watch its tongue and what it says.
- Fifth, it will cause strife and jealousy and bitterness and envy to cease among Christians.
- Sixth, it will teach patience and prayer.

All through the letter you will find the most practical things resulting from the venture of faith.

The two letters of **Peter** come from the disciple who, in his impulsive brashness, declared that he would never deny the Lord. He was perfectly sincere when he said, “Lord, the others may fail you, but you can count on me.” That very night, as Jesus had warned him, he betrayed the Lord with a curse and denied him three times before the cock crowed. He went away into the night with Jesus’ words ringing in his ears, “When you have turned again, strengthen your brethren,” {Luke 22:32b RSV}.

When you turn to the letters of Peter, you find that this is what he is doing. He is strengthening his brethren in the midst of the trial of faith. For the things which make faith tremble are trial and testing, hardship and suffering, strange things which happen to us, unusual catastrophes which come into our lives out of the blue. These things make us fearful, and we ask, “Why?” Peter answers that question. Why do these things happen? Because faith makes us a part of the life of Jesus Christ. And to reach the people of a lost and rebellious world costs pain, and suffering, and heartache, and the willingness of love to put up with rebuff and rebuke, and still to follow after them. We become part of that. Peter is simply saying that in the hand of the Lord we are the instruments by which he is fulfilling the work that he does in this world. As Paul put it in Colossians 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,” {Col 1:24 RSV}. That is the reason for the trials of faith, the answer to why faith suffers.

Then, when you come to the three letters of **John** you discover how faith works. The key verse is in Chapter 3, Verse 23, of the first letter:

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. {1 Jn 3:23 RSV}

That is how faith works. It believes continually and is continually venturing – today one venture, tomorrow another; this moment a step of faith, the next moment another step of faith. As you see in the first letter of John especially, this will take the form of walking in the light, first of all; manifesting love, second; and reflecting the life of Christ, third.

- Light, love and life are the themes of 1 John.
- In 2 John the theme is the truth.
- In 3 John it is obedience in the position of responsibility and leadership.

So faith works by a continual walking, step after step. This is the walk of faith.

In **Jude** you come to the book that sets forth the perils of faith. The interesting thing about this book is that when Jude sat down to write it he planned to write on something else. He says in the third verse that he was “eager to write to you of our common salvation,” {Jude 1:3b RSV}. I don’t know whether he knew it or not, but Paul had already written on that subject in the letter to the Romans. It was not necessary for Jude to write on it, though he had planned to write a treatise on the common salvation. However, when he began to write, the Holy Spirit guided him differently, and he ended up writing and appealing to them “to contend for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints,” {Jude 1:3c RSV} In this letter we find the subtle perils which will undermine faith and keep it from venturing upon the promises of God. As we read it through we learn what they are. There is libertinism, i.e., the desire to have your own way. There is immorality. There is greed. There is false authority, divisiveness, worldly people, and all the other perils upon the pathway of life. But Jude closes his letter with these admonitions (Verses 20-21):

But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith [that is the key; that is

the operative word]; **pray in the Holy Spirit** [that is the exercise of faith]; **keep yourselves in the love of God** [that, again, is the exercise of faith]; **wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.** {Jude 1:20-21 RSV}

All this is the continual exercise of faith. Now, it is possible for us to have great possessions in Christ without any or very little experience of exercising faith. That is why the continual exhortation is to be strong in faith – not by looking at our faith, but by looking at the great facts which God has set before us. As we contemplate these facts which God himself has uttered – a God who cannot lie – and we think about them, and as we remember how many others have stepped out upon these promises and have found they work, and as we read and think about the underlying foundations which God has deeply laid in human history, we find there is an awakening within us of the urge to venture. Then do it! That is the test. There is the crisis. When you feel a sense of being led to try it, to dare it, then respond!

The book of Hebrews tells us of the great complaint which God had against his people. It is recorded for us in the fourth chapter, Verse 2:

For good news came to us just as to them; but the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers. {Heb 4:2 RSV}

The message came with all its mighty proclamation of fact, but it didn’t do any good because they didn’t respond when faith was awakened with them – they didn’t venture out upon it. But there is no limit to what you could accomplish, no limit to the mighty promises you can see fulfilled in your own life, when you begin to step out upon them.

That is what faith is.

May God increase our faith.

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this look at your mighty Word. And we feel our need, Lord, in this respect. But we know that it doesn’t do any good to look within and to

try to feel around and find out and weigh how much faith we have. We thank you that faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Give us an open ear. Give an illuminated understanding which hears these words as we have never heard

them before. Let them come with brilliant clarity to our hearts, that we may waken and leap up and respond and say, "Thank you, Lord. On the basis of this promise, I will step out and be what you want me to be." For we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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The End

by Ray C. Stedman

Many weeks ago we began a survey of the Scriptures. We began learning the purpose of all of revelation – what its objective is. It is summed up for us in Ephesians 4:11-13:

And [Christ's] gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment 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 of 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}

All that God has done, the entire focus of the revelation of Scripture, all that is contained in the pages of the Bible, is aimed at one objective – maturing each one of us, making each of us an instrument of God's grace, an expression of the divine life, so that in us the fullness of God is at work, in order that each of us becomes a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself. God will never rest content until this is true. And all of the revelation that is given to us is necessary to accomplish this.

We have seen also how both the New Testament and the Old Testament make their unique contributions to this purpose. The Old Testament is a book of preparation. As we read its pages we find ourselves reacting in ways similar to these Old Testament men and women. Our hearts are prepared to feel the way they feel, to think the way they think. We see that they went through the same problems and faced the same difficulties that we do. The hunger of their hearts is the hunger of our hearts. The thirst of their souls is the thirst of our souls. All of this is designed to prepare us to receive the truth that the New Testament sets forth,

which is the presentation of Jesus Christ – preparation in the Old Testament, presentation in the New Testament.

The Old Testament accomplishes its purpose of preparation in four ways, in its four major divisions.

- First of all, the five books of Moses set forth the pattern of God's working. If you want to know what God is going to do next in your life, I suggest you read those five books, for he invariably follows this pattern in the life of every single individual.
- In the historical books we find the perils of the pathway set before us. There is no peril we will face that is not met, and not answered, in this part of the Old Testament.
- The poetical books express the protests of the human heart – the cry of the spirit, the yearning of the soul, and the groan of the body. And faith, hope and love are set forth.
- In the books of the prophets we have the promises of God – what God offers to be and to do in our lives.

The New Testament sets forth the realization of Christ:

- In the Gospels and the book of Acts we have the presentation of what Jesus was, who he was, why he came, what program he followed, the process of living that was his.

- In the epistles, divided into three groups, Christ is explained for us:
 - The first group is headed by the book of Romans. Nobody has any possibility of maturing as a Christian until he has begun to grasp what these books set forth: “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” the great secret of God’s operation in human beings, the lost secret of humanity.
 - The second group, headed by the epistle to the Ephesians, sets forth “you in Christ,” the story of a new body formed by the Holy Spirit – the sharing of life by men and women of all ages, in all the nations of earth, throughout the entire course of human history since our Lord’s first coming – the body of Christ.
 - Then, in our most recent study, we looked at the word which makes all this mighty truth available to us: *faith*, in the third group, headed by the book of Hebrews.

This brings us to the book of Revelation, the great consummation of Scripture, the book in which all the threads of doctrine which have been running through the Bible come together.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee says that this book is like a great Union Station in which all the trains terminate. As you stand in Union Station you can recognize where the train has come from by the people who alight. If they get off with overcoats and heavy clothing on, you know the train has come from the north. If people get off the train with ten-gallon hats and boots on, and talk with a slow drawl, you know the train is from Texas. If they get off with smiles on their faces, and they are happy, radiant, lovely people, you know they are from California! As we read the book of Revelation we can detect where all the trains of doctrine originate.

The story of sin finds its solution in Revelation. The agony of the human heart, in its groping after a God it does not want, and yet cannot live without, finds its explanation and its ultimate consummation in Revelation. This is a book that frightens many people. I have discovered that no book of the Bible is quite so fearsome to many as Revelation. Some

people are literally afraid to read this book. To them it is like a chamber of horrors. They read of all those strange animals, remarkable visions, and amazing beings which appear – the unusual, almost weird, personalities that occupy the pages of this book – and it becomes to them a sort of eschatological Disneyland where they are almost afraid to venture. They wonder what it is all about.

Because of this there are many who simply do not read this book. But if you read the first seven verses you will notice that this is the only book of the Bible which contains a promise of special blessing to those who read it; see Verse 3:

Blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, who keep what is written therein; for the time is near. {Rev 1:3 RSV}

Actually, I know of no book in the New Testament that lends itself more readily to a logical outline than the book of Revelation. It is not a difficult book to understand, once you grasp the key to it. We find the key right at the front door. Just pick it off the hook and use it!

In the opening chapter of the book, the Lord Jesus appears to John as he is in exile on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea, at the close of the 1st Century, and says to him, in Verse 8:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. {Rev 1:8 RSV}

Then he says to him, in Verse 19:

“Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.” {Rev 1:19 RSV}

There we find the key to the book:

- What John *sees* occupies the first chapter.
- *What is* occupies Chapters 2 and 3 – the letters to the seven churches.
- *What is to take place hereafter* occupies Chapter 4 through the rest of the book. It is a preview, in other words, of the course of human history from John’s day until now, dwelling especially upon the closing days of the age in which we live.

With that key, the book begins to fall into place.

Many who are familiar with this prelude to the book are perhaps not aware that John wrote not only this prologue but also a postlude, an epilogue. He closes with a summary of its teachings. I want to turn to that, because we cannot take time to go through the entire book in detail. Instead we will use John's own summary of what he teaches, in order to help us understand something of the message of this book.

The message of Revelation ends with the vision of the city of God. The last thing John sees is a marvelous vision of the throne of God in the midst of the city, and the tree of life once again appearing in the garden, yielding its fruit. He closes with these words (Chapter 22, Verse 5):

And night shall be no more; they need no light or lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever. {Rev 22:5 RSV}

That is the story of man as it will end. Then John begins the epilogue, or postlude, and in it he highlights certain details summarizing what he has written. These are the last words of the Apostle John so far as we know. The last words of a man are always accorded special significance. We like to hear what a man says just before he slips over the river of death into the glory beyond. Quite unconsciously, a man's last words reflect the dominant passion of his heart, of his life.

It was said that the last words of P. T. Barnum, the great circus owner, were "How much was the take today?" – which is most indicative of what he lived for.

I heard of a restaurant owner whose dying words, gasped out just as he was slipping into the darkness, were: "Slice the ham thin!" This, of course, revealed what his dominant passion was.

When we come to John's last words recorded in this postlude, we discover that he is looking back over the book he has written, which was given to him by an angel who appeared to him. He is gathering up the great and pre-eminent theme of this book that had occupied his heart. The first thing he speaks of is found in Verses 6 through 9:

And he said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. And the Lord, the

God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. And behold, I am coming soon."

Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

I John am he who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, "You must not do that I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." {Rev 22:6-9 RSV}

The speaker here is the angel that John mentions in Chapter 21, Verse 9, where he says:

Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues, and spoke to me, saying, "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb." {Rev 21:9 RSV}

That is the last vision of the book, but the angel stays on to explain a few things to John. In Verse 6 of Chapter 22, he states that he was sent by "the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets." In Chapter 22, Verse 16, John reports that Jesus says:

**"I Jesus have sent my angel to you ..."
{Rev 22:16 RSV}**

In other words, Jesus is the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets. The great and pre-eminent theme of the book is this great fact: Jesus is God. The deity of Jesus Christ is the great truth which gradually grew in the mind of John as he followed Jesus and watched him and as he lay on his human breast and felt the beating of his human heart and the warmth of his human flesh and heard his human voice speaking those marvelous words which fell from his human lips. As he listened and watched and waited and meditated and thought, there slowly dawned on John the great conviction which he sets down in the opening of his Gospel, John 1:1:

In the beginning was the Word [Jesus] and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {John 1:1 RSV}

John has had this truth driven home to him over and over, and this is the great theme of the book of Revelation.

The book begins on that note. In Verse 8, Jesus says: "I am the Alpha and the Omega," i.e., the beginning and the end, the first and the last, the A to the Z. There is nothing on either side of him. He occupies the whole of everything. Then the book goes on to show how millions of angels gather in a mighty chorus singing, "Worthy is the Lamb ... to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" {cf, Rev 5:12} throughout the book. The first and pre-eminent theme is that in the hour of human darkness, when the most terrible forces are let loose upon the earth – in the hour when hope fades and faith grows cold and almost goes out – the great, dominant note sounded is that Jesus Christ is God.

As we often sing, "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive journeys run; His kingdom spread from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more."

John has this driven home to him in a most embarrassing manner in this book. He refers to it twice and is red-faced as he writes, I am sure. He says, in Chapter 22:

... And when I heard and saw ... [these things], I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; {Rev 22:8b RSV}

Now, he doesn't do that here. He is referring to what he did before, which is given to us in Chapter 19 as it occurred. In Verse 9 the angel said to John:

"Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb." And he said to me, "These are true words of God." {Rev 19:9b RSV}

Then John says (Verse 10):

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brethren who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. {Rev 19:10 RSV}

Now, as John is looking back over his book and reading the pages he wrote, he writes down this episode again. With great shame and chagrin he records it: "I John am the one who saw these tremendous things. I saw the Lamb enthroned in glory. And do you know what I did? I was so overwrought by what I saw that I fell down and worshipped an angel. And he had to rebuke me and correct me. He said that only One is worthy of worship: 'Worship God.'"

Someone has well said, "If Jesus Christ is not God, then heaven is going to be full of idolaters, because all the way through Revelation beings are making statements like 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain,' and the worship of heaven and earth centers of Jesus Christ." Jesus of Nazareth is God.

Recently our high school young people had a very interesting visitor to their group – a young Moslem here as an exchange student from Egypt, a very personable and gracious young man who spoke about his faith. Among other things, he pointed out that they don't believe Jesus is God. They say Jesus is a prophet, like Mohammed and others, but nothing more. But that, of course, is a denial of the whole theme of Scripture, and certainly of the book of Revelation, for here it is unquestionably true that the whole created universe worships him.

So, the first great theme of this book is that Jesus Christ is the master of history.

Nikita Khrushchev said that history is on the side of the Communists. The Free World says, "No, history is on our side." Both are wrong. The book of Revelation says, "History is 'his story.'" That is the chief principle that John wants to emphasize in this book.

But there is a second great principle emphasized here, and John sets it forth in Chapter 22, Verses 10 through 15:

And he said to me, "Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy."

"Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the beginning and the end."

Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood. {Rev 22:10-15 RSV}

The second great theme of this book is its revelation of reality, of things as they really are. All of us who are Christians know that we live in a bewildering and confusing world. We know there are forces at work in life which are deliberately designed to mislead us, to blind us to the truth, to teach us lies. The Lord Jesus put his finger on the source of it when he said of Satan (John 8:44b):

“He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” {John 8:44b RSV}

The world lies in the lap of the wicked one. The whole world is saturated with satanic philosophy, which is a lie, and it is very, very difficult for us, sometimes, to see that lie even as Christians. But the glorious thing about the book of Revelation is that it is a revealing of what is true and what is false – even though the true looks bad and the false looks attractive.

At the end of the book of Daniel, the Lord told him that his “words are shut up and sealed until the time of the end,” (Dan. 12:9b {RSV}). That is, “Don’t publish it yet, for the time is not yet at hand.” But when John finishes writing Revelation at the close of the 1st Century, he is told, “Do not seal of the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near.” {Rev 22:10b RSV}. That is, “These things are about to be fulfilled.” This is the book that sets forth the developing forces in the age of the Church, which will bring to pass the final, total collapse of human history and the return of Jesus Christ to planet Earth.

Let me point out what I mean. This book opens with the letters to the seven churches. These are wonderful letters. Every Christian should be thoroughly acquainted with them. And, in a most remarkable way, these seven letters gather together in brief compass a bird’s-eye view of the entire Church Age from beginning to end, from Pentecost

to the second coming of Jesus Christ. They trace the development of ecclesiastical life from beginning to end. You and I will find our place in these letters.

Then, beginning with Chapter 4 and running on through to Chapter 22, Verse 5, the book focuses almost entirely upon the last seven-year period of this Church Age, in which all the threads of history are woven together and come to a conclusion. This is what occupies the major portion of the book.

Now, we need to know how things are going to end, even though we may not be directly involved in the end ourselves, because, as Paul tells us, the mystery of iniquity is already at work – even as it was back in his day – and it is this which will culminate in the life-and-death struggle of the last days. Therefore, we can recognize what is going on today only as we look beyond to learn how it ends. If we will evaluate the forces at work in human society today in the light of what Revelation teaches will be the end, we can tell whether they are good or evil, whether they are of God or of Satan, whether they are true or false. We will never know apart from this, because some of them look very good to us; but when we read the result in the book of Revelation, we see that they are very bad indeed. That is why this book is such a marvelous revelation of reality to us.

“Well,” someone says, “why does God stretch all this out for nineteen centuries or more?” The answer is in Verse 11:

“Let the evildoer still do evil, and let the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” {Rev 22:11 RSV}

Here is another instance – there are several of them in the Bible – where you have gathered up in very brief compass a statement of God’s procedure through human history, his historical method. It is to allow evil to run its course until its character becomes evident to all.

We used to have a saying up in Montana, “Give a bad man enough rope, and he will eventually hang himself.” In a sense, that is what God is doing in history.

When God spoke to Abraham about the land of promise, he said, “The iniquity of the Amorites who live in the land is not yet full; therefore you

will have to wait awhile before you go in to take it," {cf, Gen 15:16}. It is necessary for evil to run its course. And when it does, everyone sees that God's judgment is right. That is why the history of these nineteen centuries has been the lifting of the restraints of law and order on human life. And that, in turn, is why this Church Age grows more and more lawless as it nears its end. So long as law and government prevail, men are afraid to express themselves, of course. The reason why we behave, most of the time, is that we are afraid we'll get caught doing wrong. We behave because of pressures that are placed upon us. Human life is like that. But if we allow law and government to be lifted, the true character of human nature begins to display itself. This is what explains all the horrors of the book of Revelation. God is lifting the restraints, temporarily removing the bonds which have kept man in line, and allowing him to express himself. All the evil in human life flashes out in these terrible pictures in this book.

I know there are those who tell us that the world is getting better, in general, and that men are more tolerant, more understanding, and more sympathetic. Don't you believe it! If Jesus Christ of Nazareth returned to this planet Earth today, they would crucify him again – faster than they did in Jerusalem. You need only look at the outbreaks of violence on every hand today to see how true this is. Civilization is a very thin veneer indeed, and once the veneer of law and order is lifted temporarily, all the restrained violence of human evil breaks out.

Back in the 1930's, when Ethiopia was invaded by Italy, Emperor Haile Selassie had to leave the country. There was a four-day interval between the time his government left and the Italian armies came in. During those four days the citizens of Addis Ababa threw aside all restraints. Law and order disappeared. Some of the Sudan Interior missionaries who were there reported that it was a time of incredible horror, when bands of men would roam the city streets raping women, looting stores, doing anything they pleased. The mission compound was located four miles outside the city limits, but the fires ignited by these roving bands of unrestrained, lawless men illuminated the night skies to such an extent that the missionaries could read a newspaper by the light. Now, that is something of an explanation of the horrors of this book.

So, as restraint is gradually lifted, truth is made manifest. And at the return of Jesus Christ it will be crystal clear that the entire world is divided into two classes – those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, and therefore "have the right to the tree of life" and to "enter the city by the gates"; and those who have rejected or refused Christ and thus remain exactly what they were: "dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters and liars."

There is a third great principle emphasized in Revelation. It is found in Verses 16 through 21 of Chapter 22:

"I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star."

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come." And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price. I warn every one who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen. {Rev 22:16-21 RSV}

The third great theme of this book is the present offer of grace. Did you notice what Verse 16 says? "I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches." This book was not written for the end of this Church Age. It is written for today, for the present hour. It is for the churches, in order that the Church may know what its message to the world is. What is that message? It is one word – "Come."

As we see the world moving with frightening rapidity toward the great chasm of history that this book describes, what shall be the hope to which the Church clings in this gathering darkness? Well, it is Christ as "the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star." "The root and the offspring of David" means that Jesus was the son of

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David, both as man and king. That is what David was – a man and a king. That is what Christ is – the man who is the King of all. And, as the morning star appears in the darkest hour of the night, before the sunrise, Jesus is the anchor of those who are living in the darkness of this world. We are to hold up this One to a perishing world with the simple message, “Come.” Just “Come” – that is all.

The message of the Church is not to try to get the world to redistribute its wealth, or to solve its racial problems, or to end the nuclear arms race. Its message to the world is just one word – “Come.” You will find in Jesus all that you need, whatever it may be. And this encompasses the total message of the Scriptures. That one word can be enlarged to include all the mighty, deep things of God, all the great revelation of the Scriptures. But it always comes to that one focus. All we really have to say to men and women today is this: “Come – Come to Jesus just as you are, without any attempt to correct or change yourself. He can satisfy. He can meet your need. If you are thirsting and hungering, there is One who can meet that need. If you are satisfied with yourself, your case is hopeless. But if you are thirsty – come!”

This invitation is so simple that even Christians are offended by it, and so there are two red lights hung on either side of it here. John says: “Do not add to it – and do not take away from it.” That is: “Don’t add any legalistic conditions to it; don’t say that somebody has to be baptized, or confirmed, or simonized, or pasteurized, or anything else. And don’t make any devious subtractions from it; don’t make it less than it is. Just say, ‘Come.’”

So, those are the great emphases of Revelation – the preeminence of Jesus Christ, the revelation of reality, and the present offer of grace. As you read the book you will see these three emphases repeated again and again.

Notice that each of these emphases is sealed by a promise of Christ’s second coming. In each of these three sections the Lord Jesus interrupts his words to John to seal them with the promise that he is coming “soon.” Look at Verse 7 of Chapter 22 for his first reminder:

“And behold, I am coming soon.”

Blessed is he who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book. {Rev 22:7-8 RSV}

This guarantees that he is the pre-eminent One. He is coming back again.

Then, in Verse 12, we have this second reminder:

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done.” {Rev 22:12 RSV}

The second coming is the guarantee that all that has been hidden from man, all the devious deceit of the age; all the darkness and confusion and bewilderment under which men have lived, shall be lifted and we shall see things as they really are, when he comes.

The third reminder of his return is in Verse 20:

He who testifies to these things says, “Surely I am coming soon.” {Rev 22:20a RSV}

This is the message to the Church as it is declaring to the world the invitation to come. So, we have this final word of John as he closes the book:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. {Rev 22:21a RSV}

Revelation is a book intended for us, to keep our hearts through the dark hour.

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