

THE MYSTERIOUS WORD

by Ray C. Stedman

What a week this has been! On top of Christmas shopping and through the kindness of some friends, I had the delightful experience last week of flying by private jet to Kalispell, Montana, and speaking to a Christmas party of both Christians and non-Christians on the theme of the Babe of Bethlehem. In the news things are pretty much the same. Once again Congress failed to bail us out so the United States went broke last night, as we always seem to do at this time of the year. But the highlight of the week, of course, was the second coming of Gary Hart! As we draw near the end of 1987, we reflect upon the many unpredictable changes that have occurred in the past year. Yet what warms my heart is to know that, in the midst of all this flux and change, one thing remains absolutely unchangeable -- and that is the word of the Living God! The message of the Bible never alters. It is always up-to-date, and always speaks to the issues of our time. The Bible is like a solid rock in the midst of a desert of shifting sand. It is the most precious object on the earth today.

Abraham Lincoln called it "God's best gift to man."

Daniel Webster said, "If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering and to prosper. But if we or our posterity neglect it and its instructions and authority, no man can tell how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury all our glory in profound obscurity." Those are prophetic words for these times.

In our studies in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, we begin today with a marvelous verse about the Word of God.

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. {1 Th 2:13 RSV}

What a profound statement of truth about the Word! In parallel with other passages, it declares that the Word of God is indeed a most remarkable instrument. No other verse in the Bible states so clearly, and obviously that the Word of God comes to us through ordinary human beings just like us. Part of the glory of Christmas is that God's word became flesh, became a man, to communicate with us in terms that we can understand. Throughout history, God has always done that. He has communicated through human beings who look, talk and behave just like us. Thus, the Bible speaks to our specific need.

In the Gospels, there were only three occasions when God spoke directly to people. The experience astounded everybody who heard, paralyzing them with fear. God spoke aloud when Jesus was baptized. Then, when our Lord was on the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James and John, God spoke to them directly. And again during that fatal last week in Jerusalem, when Jesus announced that he was about to die, the Father spoke from the heavens. But he does not do that very often. Most of the time he speaks through human beings, and he does so in various ways.

Jeremiah says that the Word of God came to him like a "burning in his bones," {cf, Jer 20:9}. It was something he had to utter; he could not keep quiet about it. Elijah declared that the Word of God came to him like "a still small voice," {1 Ki 19:12}. It probably was not a voice at all but a quiet realization that God was speaking to him. Daniel said that God spoke to him in "visions and dreams in the night" {Dan 2:9, 7:2, 8:2, 10:8 and others}, and he went on to interpret those strange and marvelous dreams and visions. Moses said that when God communicated with him, he spoke to him "face-to-face, like a man speaks with his friends," {Exod 33:11}. That does not mean that Moses saw God, because the Bible also says that no one has ever seen God. What Moses was saying was that the communication was so clear it was as though God was speaking directly to him. As a result, Moses wrote the first five books in our Bible. The Apostle Peter wrote that "holy men of old spoke as they were carried along by the Spirit," {cf, 2 Pet 1:21 KJV}. This is the most common way in which the Word of God has come to us.

Certainly that is the way the Thessalonian Christians experienced it. Paul stood up and began to speak to

certainly, that is the way the three thousand experienced it. They stood up and began to speak to them, and as he spoke, they were conscious that what they were hearing was far more than the words of a mere man. They were hearing the Word of God, and they received it, says Paul, as such. The greatest of all revelations, of course, was that magic moment when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. A great star hung over the sleeping village, dropping its silver glory upon the waiting earth. The shepherds heard the voice of angels. Troubled and puzzled, they came to a dark cave in the hillside and found a mother and her child. John records that it was then that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory," {cf, John 1:14}. The book of Hebrews declares that is the final and ultimate revelation of God to man. The book opens with that declaration: "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," {cf, Heb 1:1-2a KJV}. Nothing can supersede that ultimate revelation.

This raises a problem, of course, because if the Word of God comes through ordinary people, it can easily be imitated. False prophets can claim that their phony, fraudulent expressions are also the Word of God. History records a long parade of false prophets, charlatans and kooks, all of whom have claimed to speak a message from God:

The Mormon prophet, Joseph Smith, claimed that an angel named Moroni appeared to him and revealed things to him. Smith claimed to have been given special spectacles to enable him to read a language written on golden tablets which he would find buried in a hillside. Many people believe that claim, even though the book he wrote is vastly different in its teachings from the Bible.

In our own day, Oral Roberts claims, among other strange things, to have seen a vision of a nine hundred-foot Jesus.

Thousands of people today claim that God speaks directly to them and gives them a so-called "word of knowledge" about what is going on in someone else's life. This phenomenon has even been displayed on television.

How can we tell when God has really spoken and when we are hearing from a false prophet claiming to speak for God? The Scripture does not leave us without help in that regard:

First, we must remember that God's actions in the world always agree with his words. The Bible claims that God is its author, and that he is also the Maker of the physical world and all the forces that are at work in the world. He is the controller, King, the Lord over all of history and the affairs of men. If both are true, then one can expect that true experience will confirm what the Word says. History testifies to the fact that God never acts contrary to his Word. Thus, if someone promises you something that the Word of God does not promise, you can know immediately that you have heard a false prophet speaking.

Furthermore, when a prophet, man or woman, predicts that a certain event will occur in the future, and it does not happen, the Bible declares that that person is a false prophet. The Bible makes the amazing claim that when it makes a prediction it must be 100% accurate or you can disregard it; it is not the word of God. Measured by that standard, some of the predictions we hear today are rather ridiculous.

Every year the National Enquirer publishes the predictions of the psychics of our day for the next year. I buy the year-end edition and keep it just to see how many of their predictions are borne out. You may be interested to know that included among those made last January for 1987 were the following:

1. One psychic predicted that the Russian leader Gorbachev would be shot on May 1st during a celebration of the Russian Revolution. I know he has a peculiar mark on his forehead, but whether it is a scar of a healing wound or not I cannot tell, but I do not think that it is.
2. Another psychic said Khadaffi, the Lybian dictator, would be shot by one of his own guards and left paralyzed. Obviously that has not been fulfilled.
3. One psychic predicted that Michael Jackson would leave his musical career to become a TV evangelist. There are some vacancies in that profession now, but Michael Jackson is certainly not one of them.
4. Another prediction was that the United States would launch an attack upon Iran in 1987 during which the Ayatollah would be killed. You could almost wish that would be true, but it is not.

Those false predictions mark the prophets who made them as phonies and not to be trusted. Many people have followed the predictions of Jean Dixon, but the percentage of accuracy that she has attained is no higher than about 40%, which is about the same anyone could attain with good guesses.

But one of the clear marks of the Word of God is that it is absolutely accurate. It accords with reality.

After the first service this morning, a handsome young man came up to me and said, "I recommitted my life to Christ this year because I came to see that the Bible is true. This is the way that God runs his world. I could see that anything less than that is not to be trusted."

The apostle gives another way to test reality, found in the phrase at the end of Verse 13, "...the word of God, which is at work in you believers." The real Word of God always changes people and makes them different. To merely memorize or mentally accept it does not change anyone, but if people begin to act on it, to obey it, they will be permanently changed; the Word will make them into different people. The Bible itself makes that claim. Hebrews 4:12 says,

For 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. {Heb 4:12 RSV}

God, by his Word, analyzes your motives and changes them, helping you to see that what you have been thinking is wrong then and corrects it. You then begin to be different. That is what Second Timothy 3:16 says:

All Scripture is inspired by God [breathed out by God] and profitable [all Scripture is useful] for teaching [for instructing you about things you could never know otherwise], for reproof [telling you what has gone wrong in your life], for correction [instructing you on the changes you need to make], and for training in righteousness [the practical guidelines to truth: how to react to situations, how to handle your anger, your sex drive, or whatever it may be], {2 Tim 3:16 RSV}

Most of us are familiar with the story of *The Mutiny on the Bounty*. In the nineteenth century, mutineers took over the ship, set their captain adrift in a lifeboat, and ended up finally on the island of Picturing in the South Pacific. But we do not often hear much about what happened to them after they landed. They were rather rough, tough, godless sailors for the most part. Together with the wives they had taken with them from the island of Tahiti, they spent spend their days on Picturing drinking, gambling, carousing and fighting with one another. Soon the fighting led to battle, and they killed each other off until the colony was reduced to a handful of people. Among them was a man named Alexander Smith. Rummaging through his trunk one day, he found a Bible that his mother had put there. He began to read it, and soon it changed his life. Then he read to the surviving mutineers, and it changed their lives. When that island was rediscovered some years later, it had become a model community. There was no jail because they had no crime. They loved God and they loved each other. The book had totally changed their lives and their society!

Thirdly, the apostle says that this wonderful life-changing Word has another remarkable power, and that is, it often arouses violent opposition.

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea; for you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all men by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they may be saved -- {1 Th 2:14-16a RSV}

Every generation, every century, has seen this happen. Throughout history, Christians have been persecuted and martyred. They have been bound in animal skins and left to shrink in the hot sun, thrown into lions' dens, burnt alive, exiled, etc. Why the violent opposition to this remarkable Word with its power to bless and transform? There are three major reasons which I will briefly mention:

First, it is clear from the Scriptures that the gospel ignores all human achievement. God is totally unimpressed with degrees, awards, position, tenure, wealth, or any other trappings of power. Everybody

must come to him the same simple way -- by admitting they cannot help themselves and by accepting salvation as a gift from the hand of God through Jesus Christ. As the old hymn puts it, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thee cross I cling." Religious achievements, a good belief system, or good moral behavior do not impress God. There is only one way to approach him, and that is through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself declared, "No one can come to the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6}. You may believe in God, but you will never know him as Father unless you come by Jesus.

Other religions find this claim to be offensive. Why, I do not know, because much of life is like that:

- The laws of electricity must be carefully observed before you dare tinker with electric current and it does not show respect of persons. You cannot make up your own laws.
- The telephone company insists you get the correct numbers in sequence when you use the telephone. You do not have the liberty of arranging them to your own liking. You must get them just right.

God insists that there is only one way to be reconciled with him, and that is through Jesus Christ. That makes a lot of people very angry.

But whether Buddhists or Muslims, Baptists, Methodists or Presbyterians, religious performance does nothing to impress God. Neither will it change us. The only thing that can change us is the Word of God, received by faith.

The second reason the gospel arouses violent opposition is that it exposes human pride. There is a terrible evil in all of us which we try to hide. I find it in myself. I am stubborn at times, and I excuse myself on the grounds that people need to be stubborn occasionally. Besides, I am half Scot and the Scots are known for stubbornness. But that is nothing but pride, an independent spirit that says, "I don't need any help. I can make it on my own." We are all guilty of this in varying degrees, but we keep it under control for fear of recrimination or out of a desire not to be known as prideful or stubborn. But if the restraints are removed, that pride will suddenly break out in the most terrible form of viciousness and vindictiveness.

What a vivid demonstration we had of this in the destruction of PSA Flight 1771 recently. An individual whose heart was seething with hatred for another man whom he imagined had done him dirt, took a gun and murdered not only the man who had offended him, but the pilots of the plane, destroying also forty-two other lives, and caring nothing for it. That is how terrible human pride can be. But the gospel exposes that in us, and declares to us that is the way God sees us. No one can claim to be any different before him for God reads their hearts. People do not like that. They resist and react violently to it at times.

Proverbs says there are seven things God hates, and number one on the list is, "a proud look," a self-sufficient spirit, an independent trust in one's own powers. Perhaps an old hymn best expresses how we must approach God:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
'Behold I freely give,
The living waters; thirsty one,
stoop down and drink and live.'
I came to Jesus and I drank of that
life-giving stream.
My soul was blest, my heart revived,
and now I live in Him.

The key is that phrase, "stoop down." You cannot receive living water unless you are willing to stoop down, to admit you do not have it. There is no other hope, no other way. You must admit you cannot save yourself -- but that is what so many refuse to do.

A third reason why the gospel arouses opposition is because it forgives blatant sinners; those who richly deserve death and hell in the eyes of the world. The Pharisees were very offended because Jesus received adulterers, prostitutes, swindlers and outcasts, while they themselves, respectable moral people, were

excluded. That is why they finally killed Jesus. Many oppose the gospel because it appeals to the disreputable. But that is its glory: it can change anyone who will receive it in humility and contrition.

The last thing the apostle says here is that God sometimes takes very severe measures to awaken people to their situation.

... so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. [Here he is referring to the Jews in Judea who were persecuting the believers.] But God's wrath has come upon them at last! {1 Th 2:16b RSV}

Paul makes reference to the dark cloud of national disaster that was hanging over Israel at this time. As he wrote this letter, the Roman armies were already hassled by Jewish rebellion. Before long they would lay siege to Jerusalem and finally break down its walls, destroy the temple, take the Jews captive, and lead them out into dispersion among the nations of the earth. Paul knew that was coming. God has in great patience allowed them to "fill up the measure of their sins." He waited to the last moment. God is not an angry, vindictive Being who hurls thunderbolts of judgment upon men at slight provocation. No, he gives us a chance to wake up see what is happening to us, and waits for us to change. But if we do not, there comes a time when he forces us to live with the consequences of our actions. Disasters hit in order to shake us and wake us. That is what Paul is talking about. God's wrath brings upon us terrible consequences as a last-ditch measure to open our eyes to reality.

That is happening in our world today. In response to the AIDS crisis, we are hearing much about so-called "safe sex." People are being told that it is possible, by using certain safeguards, to have what is called "safe sex" and avoid possible pregnancy or disease. But, according to the Scripture, there can be no such thing as "safe sex" outside of marriage. Though pregnancy and disease may be prevented by taking certain measures, what cannot be evaded is the moral disaster brought on by sexual promiscuity. "For this cause," the apostle says, "the wrath of God comes upon the children of disobedience," {Eph 5:6 RSV}. It cannot be avoided; there is no way of escape. There is no way to "have it all" and yet avoid that final reckoning of God's judgment. There is no way, ultimately, to escape the effects upon society of individual promiscuous living. Instead of finding liberty and freedom, as is promised, what we have instead is child abuse, rape, violence, serial murders, drug abuse, and rocketing teenage suicide.

These sobering words should encourage those of us who know the Lord Jesus to celebrate Christmas differently this year. Let us not become caught up in the shallow expressions of the world. As we gather around the tree with our families, let us read again the Christmas story and give grateful thanks for the gift of Jesus Christ our Lord. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior," {Luke 2:11a KJV}. To you who cannot save yourselves, to you who are already perishing because of the forces at work in your life over which you have no control, "to you is born this day ... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:11 RSV}. Let us make him the center of our Christmas celebration.

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