

LOOKING AT THE WORLD THROUGH THE WORD

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For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. -- Romans 15:4

I

During a meeting of some leaders from theological schools, the leader of one of our morning devotions read from a Bible that he afterward said he especially treasured. His devotional was a pertinent and inspirational model of what a devotional should be, but the comments he afterward made about the Bible from what he had read made his presentation all the more memorable. That Bible was given to him by a former student.

The student had graduated from the seminary at which my friend was teaching, but he had come there after receiving his degree from a college whose professors held strong views against the Revised Standard Version. They used only the King James Version in their classes, and advised that any and every other rendering of the Scriptures was to be avoided at all costs, and also any theological seminary in which the RSV was being used. The student had dared to break with that counsel. Wanting the best theological education for the ministry he envisioned, and over the protest of his college advisor, the student enrolled in the seminary where my friend was teaching. There he discovered God in a deeper way, and through the very rendering of the Scriptures his college teachers had opposed. So grateful was he for how he had been helped to understand and use the Scriptures, that student made a gift to his treasured professor of a new Bible. On the inside page, the professor found this handwritten comment: "Thanks for opening the Scriptures to me, thereby helping me to see life more clearly."

The Scriptures do help us to see life more clearly, and to live more fully. Paul

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was thinking about all this when he wrote our text. From across his lifetime of studying the Scriptures, first as a rabbinical student, then as a busy rabbi, and later as a convert to the gospel and life as a committed Christian, Paul wrote out of his own experience. Out of a welter of experiences in which he had depended on the wisdom, revelation, and resourcefulness of the Scriptures, Paul could write knowledgeably about what the Scriptures are and what they can do when they are remembered and regarded. The text reminds us that the Scriptures are not mere documents from the past, but writings that speak with a living voice that addresses each on-going generation. The Scriptures are perpetually vital and valuable, indeed indispensable for instruction in salvation-history. The past is involved in the record, to be sure, but it is a past whose instructive message grants a vision by which to stay on course with God, remain steady in living, and encouraged as we face the limits and frustrations that mark so many of our days. Paul wrote about the Scriptures as he did because he had greatly profited and lastingly endured by looking at life in the world through eyes informed by God's Word.

II

The Scriptures are important if we are to see the created order in the proper light.

The physical world in which we are privileged to live is an awe-inspiring place. The history of how this earth came to be as it now is has engaged some of the finest minds, and still does. Full agreement has not been reached among those who study such matters, but all of them agree that the need to keep probing reality still prods them on. Last year, President Edwards and I received and answered mail from some ministers who wanted our university and seminary to go on record and be listed among schools and groups which support Earth Creationism. That is the positional view of creation that teaches, among other things, that God created everything natural in six twenty-four hour days. President Edwards and I were in agreement with them that God created all things, as the Bible teaches, but we tried to help them see from the Genesis story itself that not all of the days mentioned in Genesis 1 were twenty-four hour days, since the sun, which governs our solar day, was not brought into being, as the Creation narrative states, until the fourth day. We were trying honestly to acquaint those ministers with the possibility that longer periods of time were used in the creation process, but we were also eager to acquaint them further with the Bible itself. I am sorry to report that we were not successful in trying to help them in this respect, but at least we tried.

This physical world is such a vast, vibrant, and complex entity, an immense, interesting, and inspirational place! When contemplated unhurriedly, it betrays evidences of its Creator and excites a necessary praise of God. The praise-filled psalmist exclaimed, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). How sad that the possible praise from many has been stifled and silenced by sterile notions about natural determinism.

Voyager 2, the U.S. spacecraft sent out several years ago to photograph and project pictures back to earth about distant planets and their moons, completed its tour of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune four years ago. But before it passed too far beyond those distant points, our planetary scientists had the spacecraft turn itself so that its camera could send back to us a picture of how our planet looks from that far

out point in space. The image that camera caught and conveyed of our earth was a barely discernible "pale blue dot." Deeply impressed and affected by that view, Carl Sagan wrote a book by that name, and in it he commented that the spacecraft's backward glance at our earth-home from that distance and perspective was humbling, and that it rebukes the folly of our human conceits.¹ It is not religious sentimentalism to profess to see the glory of God reflected in created things, it is biblical realism. The Scriptures help us to see the creation in proper light.

III

The Scriptures are imperative if we are to understand human nature in the proper light.

According to the Scriptures, humanity is afflicted by a besetting proneness that alienates us from our Creator. It is a constitutional selfishness that incites us to prefer, advance, and honor the self instead of God. The Scriptures have named that besetting proneness: *sin*.

The concept of sin seems foolishness to persons who see all things in the dim light of modern learning. But even the most post-modern among us must agree that there is a profound disturbance in the human environment, that the human arena in which we experience our being and behavior is heavily populated with problems that refuse to "go away" on their own. Given the daily news, we all know that human history is tragically fractured and that human beings are tragically flawed. There is a great disturbance in human nature. And yet, the concept of sin is still problematic for many people in our time.

Some view sin as a mere notion, as left-over verbiage from an earlier age whose inhabitants lacked what this generation thinks is a more precise understanding about what it means to be human. I have myself heard some people refer to the word "sin" with an unashamed blandness or with an unsympathetic tolerance. Some speak against the word with overt enmity. A radical secularism afflicts and plagues this generation. Wrong-doing has been redefined, but apart from the light of Scripture-wisdom. Sad to say, highly prized, biblically based beliefs and deeply regarded moral convictions are not as widespread or accepted as during an earlier time in our land. Even churches, still sadder to say, are guilty of reticence in using the word "sin," eager to avoid offending. But to neglect the biblical message about the human problem of sin is also to miss the real meanings associated with the biblical message about salvation. There are some church circles in which the reason Jesus came is grossly overlooked, and some others in which that reason is perhaps not even known.

Writing about the human proneness to sin, Frenchman Blaise Pascal made this comment among his *Pensées*, "Certainly nothing jolts us more rudely than this doctrine, and yet, but for the mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we remain incomprehensible to ourselves."² Put more briefly, Pascal was saying that while it is beyond our ability to explain sin fully, we cannot explain ourselves at all without taking sin into account. Pascal was not only a close observer of the human scene, his eyes and heart were instructed by the Scriptures. He claimed them as imperative for learning to deal rightly with God and ourselves.

The Scriptures not only clarify for us the basic human problem, they point us

beyond our sins to One who can save us from them, and save us from ourselves as well. The Scriptures tell us that God did not give up on us but instituted a plan by which to save us. "But God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Salvation presupposes something from which we humans need to be delivered or freed, namely some plight, some problematic condition, some situation of threat. Sin is all of these. Sin has always been, and by its nature cannot be anything other than, a plight, a sad condition, a situation of threat to one's being and fulfillment. The Scriptures tell us that the world was not made wrong but that it has gone wrong because sin came into the world through human selfishness. The message of the gospel is that we humans can be saved, delivered from that proneness to prefer the self instead of God; we can be helped to stop resisting the Almighty and learn to obey and rejoice in God. We can be saved from the powerful orientation to sinning, and become reoriented by divine instruction so that we can be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). This is the basic instruction from the Scriptures about the grand possibilities before us when we are put in touch with Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures help us to see our real need and learn the way our real need is really met. This promise of deliverance and fulfillment is to all, not just a few: "For, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved'" (Rom. 10:13). That is the Lord's promise, conveyed to us by the Scriptures.

IV

The Scriptures are inspirational, helping us to embrace and endure the full range of our human experiences.

Embrace them? Paul says, yes, "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3b-5). Embrace them? Yes, again, since in all the welter of our troublesome experiences "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37) and since "We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Such scriptures as these help us to move from pitying the self to trusting God. The Scriptures were given to lead us from eyesight to insight, to move us on from hindsight to foresight, from troubling questions rooted in doubt and despair to the high plain of a settled assurance that steadies us for life at its best. For all who dare to appeal to them, the Scriptures are still the means for steadfastness, an encouraged heart, and a settled hope.

V

Our Lord modeled what it means, and how it pays to look at the world through the Word. When under temptation in the wilderness, caught in that unavoidable breach called the valley of decision; when he needed clarity as two voices competed for his attention, he maintained composure as he viewed it all from the higher vision imparted by God's Word. Jesus answered and defeated Satan's suggestive insinuations with an informed, "It is written." That was it! Jesus looked at nature, at people, and at

his life experiences through the Word. It was his way to see clearly from God's perspective on things. When he was rejected in his hometown after some leading citizens criticized his sermon theme, he encouraged himself by remembering the faithfulness of the unpopular and persecuted prophets before him. He learned about their experiences through the Scriptures. When misunderstood by his own disciples, betrayed by one, lied about by another, and deserted by the rest, Jesus appealed to the Scriptures for encouragement and endurance. Shortly afterward, hanging on an unavoidable cross, that emblem of horror, that harbinger of death, he died valiantly, looking at death not as a grim reaper but at this own death as a means to fulfill God's plan for the rest of humankind. In the midst of the dreaded ordeal of dying, he could see with Scripture-informed eyes that the hand of God was outstretched to receive him. Thus the accented lines of that psalm he died quoting: "Into thy hands I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God" (Ps. 31:5). It was true for him then, and it is still true for us now: "The eternal God is [our] dwelling place, and underneath [us] are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27).

Informed by the Scriptures, we need not go into tantrums of fright over every saddening telecast; we need not let our spirits droop in despair over announcements and experiences that afflict and appall. Informed by God's Word, we need not lose our faith or composure. We need never lose step in our march as pilgrims "look[ing] forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 11:10). When we rightly view our human experiences through the Word, and believingly embrace them, we can perceive God's will more clearly, we can believe more assuredly, we can trust more enduringly, we can live more resourcefully, we can handle life more responsibly, we can serve others more capably, we can resist evil more surely, and we can praise God more gladly.

How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in his excellent Word!
What more can he say than to you he hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

Fear not, I am with thee; O be not dismayed,
For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand,
Upheld by my righteous, omnipotent hand.³

NOTES

1. See Carl Sagan, *The Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Random House, 1994).
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Louis Lafuma, ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 6S. See *Pensée* no. 131.
3. Hymn, "How Firm a Foundation."

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