

A Gift From Heaven

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The Bible Speaks For Itself

One can read the Bible in many different ways. One very unique way has to be the case of the person who read the Bible from the first page to the last, and all the way through he kept on counting. At the end he had figured out that the Bible contained 3,500,000 letters, 770,000 words, and that the word "Lord" occurred 6,855 times and many other such facts.

Of course, that is one way to read the Bible, but we would not recommend that you read it that way. The Bible is not a puzzle book, not a textbook for theologians, nor is it a religious novel. The Bible is the Word of God.

The Word of God

The Bible is not made up of just a series of unconnected words. On each page God speaks. He speaks through prophets, evangelists and apostles. Everything written in the Bible is connected with each other. That is why we may not use a certain text in isolation. Whatever the Bible states has been written down under God's guidance. All of it is His Word. How do we know that? There is only one answer: The Bible itself says so.

It is not up to us, human beings, to declare the Bible to be a holy book. We do not elevate it to the status of the Word of God. The Bible itself states in various places: Listen you people, God is speaking to you. "Hear O Israel!" (*Deut. 6:4*).

An example of such a passage can be found in the letter to the Hebrews where the writer quotes from the prophecies of Jeremiah (*Heb.10:16,17*; cf. *Jer. 31:33,34*). You would expect that such a quotation would be introduced with a phrase such as, "in Jeremiah we can read the following", or something similar. But that is not the case. We find something totally different. "And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us". Then follows the quotation from Jeremiah.

All of this means that the Holy Spirit, who is God Himself, spoke these words through Jeremiah. They

are Jeremiah's words, but in the final analysis they are really God's words.

Words of Men?

There are only two possibilities:

- The Bible is unreliable. Maybe now and then it makes some true remarks and is to the point, but by and large it is filled with childish fantasies and even misleading reasoning. Either the Bible is just the opinion of men, or:

- The Bible is reliable. We accept the Bible as it presents itself, as a book in which God Himself speaks to men; as the Word of God.

Which is right? As we have said before, the correct answer is that *The Bible is the Word of God*. But can we prove that this is the correct answer? No, not in the sense of "proof" arrived at through logic. It is by faith that we know that the Bible is true, that it is the Word of God (*Heb. 11:1*).

In his second letter Peter writes about the story as told in *Matt. 17*. (*2 Pet. 1: 16-21*) Together with Peter, James, and John, the Lord Jesus was on a high mountain in the wilderness. Then a voice came from heaven. God says: "This (Jesus) is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." Peter and the two other disciples heard the voice clearly. They

then knew for certain that Jesus was the true Son of God, the promised Saviour of the world, whose coming the people of Israel eagerly awaited. When Peter, while writing his letter, looks back to this event, he writes; "We heard this voice borne from heaven ... And we have the prophetic word made more sure." With that "prophetic word" he means the whole Old Testament. He accepts all the Bible books as the Word of God. Peter knew that everything these books said about Christ was true and certain. With that voice from heaven he became even more convinced about the truth of that Word. Doubt was no longer possible.

Peter explains that further in verse 21 (*2 Pet. 1:21*). He emphasizes that prophecy is never the product of men. True, it was written by men such as Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, but it was not the result of their will or ability. They were driven by the Holy Spirit and spoke on God's command. They were totally dependent on God. They were guided and encouraged by Him.

Thus, the human authors always laboured under the guidance of God, the Great Author of the Bible.

The Bible Explains Itself

All this means that you have to treat the Bible with reverence and respect. God speaks and we have to let Him speak. This means that you have to listen patiently, and to read carefully. It is very tempting to use the Bible for your own purposes. When it suits you, you are easily inclined to put your ideas into the Bible, or to read into the Bible things which are not in it. That happens all too often. Peter calls that "one's own interpretation". But you may not explain the Bible according to your taste and view. The Bible explains itself, and that is the rule which we have to follow.

Mankind Falls Apart

Genesis 4

Two countries can make a treaty or covenant with each other. In the event of an attack by a third nation they promise to help each other. In the Bible, the relationship between God and man is also called a treaty or "covenant". In this covenant both God and man make commitments to each other. God promises to save and protect man, guiding him and supplying all his needs. Man, in turn, promises to love and serve God, doing His will and honouring Him in all things.

Over Against Each Other

Despite God's very generous promises, it soon becomes apparent that not all people are interested in serving God. There are those who ignore repentance and who do not recognize the need to be saved. Mankind divides itself into two groups. The one group loves God and wants to be saved from their sin, the other group does not want to know God, and does not care about their sins. The latter determine for themselves what is good or evil. They care neither for salvation nor for the Saviour.

Indeed, this difference between people is already apparent at the very beginning of the Bible. The two sons of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, both brought a sacrifice to the Lord. Their parents had taught them to do so. The fruits of the fields and flocks were presented to God in the form of a burnt offering. In this way they acknowledged and honoured God as Lord and Creator. And so they should, for all things belong to God. He is the good Giver. After the fall man has no right whatsoever to anything on this earth. But when the two men acknowledged God with a sacrifice God rejected Cain's offering, while accepting Abel's. Why?

The reason is that Abel sacrificed his offering in true faith. Cain did not. In his sacrifice Abel acknowledged that the Lord was his Creator, and that he was totally dependent on Him. Abel knew that the only reason he could live was the fact that God gave him life. God showed him His grace. It was completely different

with Cain. From what is written about him it appears that he wanted to be his "own boss". He knew, however, that he had to keep God as a friend. His sacrifice was not an expression of thankfulness and dependence, but he made his burnt offering with the attitude that "it may not help but it can't hurt either." He wanted to pacify God in order to be free to go his own way.

In reality, this story is all about maintaining one's relationship with God, and that becomes evident as we continue. When Cain realized that God accepted Abel's offering but not his own, he became angry. In his anger he killed his brother. He committed mankind's first murder, and he showed no real regret.

The struggle, announced by God between the "seed of the woman", the believers, and the "seed of the Serpent", the unbelievers, became readily apparent in this terrible deed. Adam and Eve's own family was torn asunder. Belief and unbelief divided it. The human race went its separate ways.

The Bible mentions Lamech as one of Cain's descendants. Through Lamech's family the Bible shows us the attitude of Cain's descendants. Lamech openly declared that he was independent of God (*Gen. 4:19-24*). His industrious and gifted sons had something better to do with their lives than to serve the Lord. When you read *Gen. 4* you will discover the beginning of a culture which did not take God into account. The family of Lamech did not expect things from God but from themselves alone.

If you read Lamech's words in *Gen. 4:23,24* you will meet a life style which you often come across today as well. "We only live once, so let's make the most of it. Let's live today, for tomorrow we die." Lamech and his family tried to arm themselves against suffering on earth. They tried to forget the consequences of the fall and save themselves. They saw themselves as the owners of this world and did not concern themselves with God or His commandments.

To Call Upon the Name of the Lord

Still, there was a generation that depended on God. There were people who looked forward with longing to the coming of a redeemer.

At first, it looked as though this generation would die out with Abel, but God gave Eve another son, Seth, to continue Adam's line. When Seth received a son, Enosh, men began to call upon the name of the LORD (*Gen. 4:26*). That means that those who believed in God came together to honour Him, and to pray to Him for salvation. The descendants of Seth publicly confessed that they expected all things from God, not only in this life but also in the life hereafter. That was a totally different opinion from the one held by the descendants of Cain. The unbeliever serves himself, while the believer serves God.

The practice of calling upon God's name began in the days of Enosh but it continues today. For that reason it

is necessary to know who God is. At first God spoke directly to man. He visited Adam and Eve before and after the fall in paradise. Later He sent prophets to pass on His words. Finally, He sent His own Son to the world. Today those who wish to know who God is have to read the Bible. God makes Himself known in it. You, too, can know Him but you will have to learn to read the Bible. It is not an easy book. You will need help with it. A course such as this one may help, but it is also necessary to attend a church where the Bible is read and preached every Sunday.

God Is Faithful

There are two ways through life: with God or without God. God announced long ago that there would be a struggle between these two lifestyles. It is like a war between two armies. One is fighting for God and the other against God. It is a battle which has consequences for all of life.

Especially for the believers it will be a difficult battle. By nature they are attracted to the opposition. It demands self-denial to put God in the centre and to do what His law requires. In spite of all that, there have always been people who love God with all their might and who try to live according to His commandments. The comforting thing is that you do not have to fight alone. God is at your side. God's faithfulness to the covenant he made with Adam is the only reason this is true. You must fight Satan, but realize that Jesus Christ will be victorious, and in Him you can be victorious too. You can be sure of that.

Praying Is Difficult

You cannot pray very well if you do not know to whom you are praying. What does God want from you? How do you have to serve Him?

Praying God's Way

In his first letter the apostle John writes that God hears our prayers when we pray according to His will. Necessity teaches us to pray, it is said. But then you only pray when you are in need. God is then seen as magician, a power you call on to get you out of trouble. In reality you are then asking God to serve you. The Bible says we have to serve God. No, necessity does not teach us; it is God who commands us to pray. He wants to be acknowledged as the Creator who rules over all. He wants to be acknowledged as the Father who cares for His children. It is thus not a question of what we deem necessary, but what God says is necessary. He tells us that we have to pray. That is also what you will find in the Bible.

Prayer and the Law

The Israelites of the Old Testament knew the will of God from the law, the Ten Commandments (*Ex. 20:1-17 and Deut. 5:6-21*). That law, written on two tablets of stone, was stored in the ark and was proclaimed by God Himself. Does that law still hold for us? To our feeling prayer and the law are in opposition. With "law" you soon think of what you can do and what you cannot do. A law restricts your life. Prayer, however, is something different. It comes from you. Yet prayer and the law are not opposites. You can even say that if you do not know the law or will of God, you will not be able to pray properly.

At first glance some commandments do not seem too demanding. You shall not kill (I have never killed anyone); you shall not commit adultery (for many in our days a difficulty, yet I love my wife or husband); You shall not steal (I am no thief); You shall not bear false witness (I have never appeared before a judge). But the Bible does not agree with you. He who hates his neighbour is a murderer. Jesus Christ said that

anyone who looks at a woman with more than ordinary interest, has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matt. 5:17-48*). And what about the fifth commandment: Honour your father and mother? From the Bible it becomes clear that it relates to all kinds of relationships: "husband and wife", "master and servant", "government and subjects" (*Eph. 5:22-6:20 and I Pet. 2:13-3:7*). The Bible leaves no doubt that the law is demanding.

Yet, there are plenty of people who think that when it comes to the law they are not really doing too badly. They are quite satisfied with the way in which they serve the Lord. The Bible, however, does not make it that easy for us. Those who keep the law and fail in even one particular point are guilty of trespassing all of the law (*James 2:10*). One who kills but doesn't commit adultery, cannot say that he has sinned against one commandment. There are no separate commandments. You cannot divorce the one from the other. The whole law is one Word of God. It is one voice and he who disobeys it at any point, does not listen to Him.

Jesus summarized the law as follows: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these commandments depend all the law and the prophets (i.e. the whole Old Testament)" (*Matt. 22:37-40*). What he said was not something new. In the past it had been recorded in Deuteronomy and Leviticus (*Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18*).

The Scare of Your Life

No one can keep God's law. Everyone sins against this law, every hour, every day. We cannot keep even one of these commandments. It's really scary when you think about it. And in a way that is good, for then you see how wicked you really are. To love God above

everything else and your neighbour as yourself means that you may not put your trust in anyone or anything but God.

Yet, we can live with the law of God, because for each act of disobedience there is forgiveness. We have to pray for that. We should pray to God to give us His Holy Spirit, who will then show us our sins, through the law (*Luke 11:9-13, Rom. 8:14,15, Gal. 4:6*).

In addition we should turn to the Bible and read it with reverence, with attention, with effort. Out of that will flow a desire to do God's will. When we ask for God's Word and Spirit to guide us and help us in our prayers, our fears will vanish. The law will no longer terrify us!

God's Power

Often we are filled with worry. There seems to be no end to our difficulties and yet this is not at all necessary. As a matter of fact we are not allowed to worry. To worry is to distrust God. Worry is never a proper response, not in time of war, not in sickness, not when you are unemployed, neither when you see how small the church is and how big the world is. Yet the disciples of Jesus often worried. What does Jesus do? He points them to God's power. He calls them "you of little faith" (*Matt. 6:25,34*), not because they think so little of God. You can not think big enough of God, but all too often we think too little of him. Can God do everything? Yes, or rather no, for He cannot lie. He cannot deny Himself (*1 Sam. 15:29 and 2 Tim. 2:13*). God is not high-handed, but He is almighty. God is mighty to do what He has promised. You can read that clearly in *Psalms 33 and 121*.

Ask and it will be given you; seek and you will find; knock and it will be opened to you (*Matt. 7:7*).

In the language of today that means pray until you have received what you asked for; seek until you have found it; keep on knocking on the door until it is opened. Don't doubt. Don't think it won't help. For you are praying to God, the Almighty. He is the Almighty Father Who does not leave His children out in the cold if they honour Him. Pray! Seek! Knock! Why does God let us wait? Because He is not a supplier who merely fills in orders. We may not order anything. We may ask, implore and... trust. God wants to be trusted because He is faithful, because He is worthy of trust. He listens, indeed.

The Promises of God

To pray well we must know God's promises. That is why we must know the Bible. The entire Bible is Good News, Gospel. In the entire Bible God promises Himself. He wants to be the God of believers and their children.

He gives Himself. He gives His Holy Spirit. (*Gen.17:7; Ex.20:1; Lk. 11:13*)

He who believes will say, "The Lord is our God, and we belong to Him." (*Ps. 105:6,7; Ps. 100:3*)

God promises us forgiveness. He promises to bless us and our children. He also announces punishment for those who do not serve Him. You can find this mentioned in many places in the Bible. Read, for instance, *Exodus 34:6,7*. We do not deserve anything. We lost everything. We are dependent on Him whom we have deeply insulted. If you realize this fully you can not help but be dumbfounded and humbled as a result. For God offers us His mercy. He presents Himself to us, so that we will go to Him. Prayer is the most difficult thing in the world. You have nothing to offer, you can only receive. It is not easy for us human beings to receive and to acknowledge that we don't deserve anything. As a result, however, we receive more than we ever thought we would. Bankrupt man becomes fabulously rich because he is called an heir of God and coheir of Christ (*Rom. 8:15-17*)

Prayer and Thanksgiving

When you are in dire need you are inclined to pray. During the war churches were filled. With the coming of peace, they slowly emptied again. When the threat was over, prayer ceased too and was forgotten. Yet to pray requires continued thankfulness. It is to take hold always of His promises and so take hold of God Himself. It is to respond continually to God's Word. Prayer means remaining faithful to God in all circumstances (*Acts 4:29, John 17:15-19, Matt. 26:36-46*).

Prayer is not only for our daily needs, it also requires daily thanksgivings. Especially Paul writes about this, and it is well worth reading what he says. He never prays without giving thanks to God, and he never thanks God without praying. When we are in need and we pray without giving thanks there is something wrong with us. (*Eph. 1:15-18, Phil. 1:3-6, Col. 1:3-10, 1 Thess. 5:16-18, Luke 17:11-19*)

The issue is: prayer and thanksgiving.

Questions for Lesson 3

The Bible Speaks for Itself

1. 1. What does Peter mean with "a lamp shining in a dark place" (*2 Pet. 1:10*)?
2. 2. What does Paul say about the Bible in *2 Tim. 3:16*?
3. 3. The Bible has been written by men but there is in fact another author. It has been "inspired" as it is sometimes called. What does that mean?

Mankind Falls Apart

4. 1. Why did God reject Cain's offering and accept Abel's? (*see also Hebr. 11:4*)
5. 2. In *Gen. 4:23* we can read Lamech's song. What should a Christian's attitude be towards this type of talk? (*see Matt. 18:21,22 and Rom. 12:17-21*)
6. 3. Read *Rom. 3:9-20*. A believer, of himself, is no "better" than an unbeliever. So what is the difference between a person who believes and one who does not?

Praying Is Difficult

7. 1. Can you put into words what it means to pray in Jesus' name?
8. 2. Why must we, if we pray well, ask for forgiveness of sins?
9. 3. God in His wisdom does not always give us what we ask for. What does God always give when we ask for it? See *Ps. 32:5, Is. 1:18, and Luke 11:13* among others.