

A Gift From Heaven

The Bible Speaks With Authority

The Preserver

God Continues With Isaac

Lesson 10

REFORMED
EVANGELISM
TASKFORCE

The Bible Speaks With Authority

There is no end to the discussions, the books and the reports on every imaginable subject. Yet, one thing is clear: the final word has never been said and never been written. The most influential bodies in this world ultimately lack the power of final authority. It is no wonder then that there is so much uncertainty in our society. In every circle and sphere of life the differences of opinion are on the increase and confusion is multiplied. This applies to politics, sports, social life as well as the arts. Even within the sphere of the church, many different opinions and schools of thought exist. Over against all this uncertainty there is one certainty: the Bible speaks with authority. This makes the Bible very unique.

The Authority of the Bible

It should not surprise you that there is so much difference of opinion between people and nations. Jesus said, "For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." (*Matt. 24:24*). Obviously the Bible speaks authoritatively. Even though the authors of the Bible write in their own words and their own style, it is God who speaks to us, and God who brings His Word to us. The authority of the Bible is not the authority of a few long dead people, but the authority of a living God.

In Revelation, the last book of the Bible, you can read that no one may add or take away from the words of this book (*Rev. 22:18,19*). The same warning applies for the whole Bible. The Bible teaches us this in many different places. For instance you may want to check some texts like *Deut. 4:2, Deut. 12:32, Rom. 15:4, Gal. 1:6-10, 2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:20,21*.

Speaking on God's Behalf

Prophets of the Old Testament, like Moses for instance, knew that they had been called by God. God commissioned or gave them the mandate to speak. Of course, sometimes this commission did not suit them at all (*Ex. 2:23-4:17*). Yet they had to obey it (*Is. 6*). God used them as His ambassadors (*Jer. 1:4-10*). They were aware of the fact that He had spoken to them. They also knew that He would tell them what they had to say. That is why the prophets used expressions like: "Thus says the Lord", or "The Word of the Lord spoke unto me" and similar ones. This style gives the impression that God is the speaker. And that is exactly how it is. God speaks by the mouths of His prophets.

In connection with this the prophets make a clear distinction between whatever God tells them (*Jer. 28*), and what man thinks up or invents (*1 Kings 22:1-40*). That is the reason the false prophets are accused of speaking according to their own inventions, without having been called by God. Those false prophets, however, claimed to have been called by God. In reality they proclaimed their own ideas and opinions (*Ez. 13:3*). Jesus, too, warns us about these false prophets (*Matt. 24:5, 23-26*).

Writing on God's Behalf

In addition to their speaking, the prophets' writing is done with divine authority. In Exodus, for instance, you can read that God said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book." (*Ex. 17:14*). Compare this text with *Jer. 27:32* and *36:4* which also deal with God's command to write things down. No doubt, there are many prophecies that were not given orally but were written down directly for the purpose of reading them and thinking about them. That written word merits the same authority as that given to the spoken words of the prophets.

The Entire Bible

As people became acquainted with the different books constituting the Old Testament, these books were recognized as authoritative. In this manner the 'canon' of the Old Testament emerged. The word 'canon' originally meant a rule or standard for conduct and life. Now that word is also used to indicate the entire number of books in the Bible that are recognized as the authoritative Word of God. The 66 books making up the Bible are, therefore, called canonical books.

Jesus and His disciples treated the Old Testament canon as a book with divine authority. Although at that time it consisted of different parts and had been written by different people, they treated it as one unit of which God was the final author. This attitude becomes evident in the way they quoted parts of the Old Testament. Sometimes the name of the writer is mentioned (*Acts 2:16,25*); sometimes a standard expression is used like "It is written" (*Matt. 4:4, 10*) or "the scripture says" (*Rom. 9:17, 10:11*). But the Author is also mentioned by name: God, or the Holy Spirit (*Heb. 10:5,15; Acts 28:25*).

According to Jesus every single word, and every single letter of the Old Testament possesses divine authority (*Matt. 5:18*).

The Authority of Jesus

The authority of the Old Testament must be extended right through to the New Testament. The words of Jesus are divine and incontestable. However, just like the prophets, Jesus said nothing that God did not tell Him. Jesus is different than the prophets though. All of God's promises, whether from the Old or New Testament, are reliable only through Christ (*2 Cor. 1:19-20*). Believers must accept these promises as reliable. This is why "Amen" is used to end every sermon. It shows the trust the congregation has placed in the promises that they have just heard.

However, Jesus did not give us an autobiography in His own handwriting. He made certain that what He said was going to be communicated to mankind in a genuine and personal way. He chose the apostles and charged them with a very special task. This task was to act as His witnesses after His departure. The apostles, as you'll remember, had been ear and eye witnesses of the words and actions of Jesus. Whatever they had seen and heard from Jesus, they had to communicate to Israel and the whole world (*1 John 1:14, Acts 1:8, John 15:27*). So, those who had been witnesses had to witness themselves. You can trust their witness because Jesus gave His authority to what they wrote.

The Authority of the Holy Spirit

God endowed the apostles with wisdom and strength to perform their task by giving them the Holy Spirit. After His ascension Jesus sent them the promised Counselor (*John 16:5-7; Acts 1:4*). Empowered by that Spirit, the apostles were enabled to speak and to write down the words of Jesus (*Acts 1:8*). It is true that on the day of Pentecost all those that believed received the Holy Spirit (*Acts 2*), but the apostles received special gifts of the Spirit to be able to cope with their task as witnesses (*John 15:26,27; John 20:22,23*).

After having received the Holy Spirit, the apostles started to write. It is in this fashion that the New Testament became a reality. The Spirit is as reliable as God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. These three are, as you know, the only true God. That is why what you find written in the New Testament is the uncontestable truth. That is also why all of the New Testament has the same authority as the Old Testament.

Doubt or Certainty

How do you approach the Bible? Is it a human book with mistakes and errors? Or is it the Word of God that comes to you with divine authority and must be accepted in faith? The answer to these questions is decisive for the manner in which you treat the Bible.

Fortunately there is an answer, but then only one. Only the Bible has divine certainty and authority. Whoever believes in the divine authority of the Bible and wants to submit to that authority in faith, will receive this certainty. The Bible is the only solidly fixed entity in this world. If you simply rely on the Bible you will be rewarded with certainty.

The Preserver

Article 1

When God finished His creation, He did not abandon it to its own devices. No, God maintains His creation; He looks after it. In *Gen. 1 and 2* you can read that the world was created by God in six days. And every day since then, God has been busy maintaining His creation.

Divine Patience

Even after the fall into sin, which resulted in big changes to the world, God continued to care for His creation. You can experience this every day, even though it looks so self-evident. Day and night, summer and winter, are more than just the results of nature's laws. God Himself takes care of this. He has made a "covenant of the day, and ... covenant of night" (*Jer. 33:20*). We often have a complacent and superficial attitude towards creation, but we should be filled with awe.

God maintains our world, His world, because He wants to deliver man, through Jesus, from sin. The Bible calls this God's "forbearance" or patience with us (*2 Peter 3:9*). God is patient, and God is forbearing, but God has set a limit to His patience. His patience will not last forever. This means that each new day God permits this world to exist, is actually a new and urgent appeal to listen to Him, and to do what He demands of us. There is still time. Every day again God shows us His mercy. Every day again He promises His salvation to whoever turns to Him, but this world could end anytime (*2 Cor. 6:1,2*).

Governed by God

Another way of saying that God maintains His creation, is that God governs everything. He possesses all power in heaven and on earth. Everything in this world including man, animals, even the

devil and death are governed by Him (*Job 1,2*). Unless God permits it, nothing can happen. We sometimes question why God sends us sickness, poverty, famine, and many other unpleasant situations, but in all these things we know He cares for us. If He takes care of the sparrows, how much more will He not care for us? (*Matt. 10:29-31*).

God's government is not only visible in everyone's life, but also in the world at large. Both creation and history are ruled and governed by Him. And this is the most important item on God's agenda: to provide salvation for mankind through Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament we can read how God, in spite of all the opposition of Satan, promises to send His Son into the world. In the New Testament we see how God did send His Son and then had the message of His Son's salvation sent throughout the world. We see how, throughout history, Christ prepares for the future of a new world (*Rev. 21:1-8*). Certainly the devil tries time and again to prevent the arrival of that new world by direct attacks on the Christ Himself and by attacks on His followers (*Luke 4:1-13; Job 1,2*). These terrorist practices of Satan can cause a lot of trouble and suffering but are unable to harm the work of God (*Matt. 26:24*). On the contrary! Even the opposition and obstruction of Satan are utilized by God to promote the salvation brought about by Jesus Christ.

God also governs heads of state, like emperors and kings. An excellent example of this is Caesar Augustus (*Luke 2:1-5*). This emperor was responsible for an immense network of roads and the great measure of peace and security that existed throughout his whole empire. In this way God prepared everything for the spreading of the gospel to "all the world". The census which the emperor

decreed in order to establish his empire was humiliating for Joseph, a descendant of King David. Yet, this decree made sure that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (*Mic. 5:2*), exactly as the prophet had foretold (*Matt. 2:4-6*).

Nothing Comes by Chance

If God upholds and governs His creation, then nothing can come by chance. Although things may seem to come by chance for us, they are controlled by God. Whatever happens to you is not determined by fate. Prosperity and adversity come to you from the hand of the heavenly Father (*Luke 12:4-7*). This provides security in your life (*Luke 12:22-31*). Famines, wars, traffic accidents, unemployment, the death of your acquaintances, all these things are used by God.

If this is true, is God then not the same thing as fate? We cannot comprehend God's governing and ruling, much like a child is unable to understand why his concerned parents do certain things he does not like. Our framework of understanding is too limited. God Himself has said that He wants to be a Father for whoever loves Him. God's mercy is endless (*Hos. 11:8,9*). "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (*Rom. 8:28*). Whoever believes that and trusts in these words, will keep his faith and trust even during times of great sorrow. When we accuse God of pain, suffering and mourning, we no longer take

into account the seriousness of sin. Whoever accepts God's rule over his life, in faith, may still have to suffer in this life, but in God's new world he will dwell forever in splendour and glory (*Rom. 8:18; 1 Pet. 5:10; Rev. 21:4*).

God's Love

Everything that makes life so unbearable at times, the sorrow the pain, the suffering, and everything around you which seems to be so unfair, is only temporary. These sufferings have been compared to the pangs of a woman giving birth. These pains are brief and, however severe, precede the joy of new life (*Rom. 8:22*).

In *Romans 8:38,39* we read some unforgettably beautiful words. "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

In light of this, is it still so important to know why all this pain has to exist, or why all the misery that is filling up the world is necessary? Is it still that important, considering what comes after all this?

God Continues With Isaac

Genesis 24

Abraham continued to believe in the promises of God (*Gen. 21-25*). He was convinced of the reliability of the Word of God. Keep in mind, though, that this conviction and faith did not originate with Abraham himself. God gave him this faith. God took care that Abraham believed and continued to trust Him, even when things became difficult, and even when the fulfillment of those promises seemed impossible by human standards. Faith is always a gift of God.

Paul writes, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -not because of works, lest any man should boast" (*Eph. 2:8,9*). Even Abraham could not boast in his faith. Faith is a gift of God's grace. It is nothing less than God's love at work. God wanted to take care of Abraham and the people of Israel. God's work of salvation never stops.

What Next?

God promised that through Isaac His promises would be fulfilled. When Isaac reaches a suitable age Abraham realizes that if Isaac is going to continue the line to Christ he will need a wife (*Gen. 24:1, 21:12*) And according to the customs of the age, Abraham had to take care of that.

The family of Abraham and Sarah in which Isaac grows up, had a very special position among the surrounding people. God had made a covenant with this family. This meant that Abraham, with everything he possessed, was God's servant and that his family had to serve the Lord as His obedient children. Meanwhile, the people around them did not want to recognize Abraham's God. Even the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah did not alter the lifestyle of the inhabitants of Canaan. It is, therefore, not a simple task for Abraham to find a wife for Isaac. It has to be a woman who wishes to live with Isaac in the service of God. In order to find such a girl, Abraham sends his faithful servant to the region where his relatives are living, to Padan-aram at the Euphrates river in Mesopotamia. Under no circumstances was Isaac to marry a Canaanite woman.

Another Miracle

In *Genesis 24* you can read the beautiful and captivating story about how Rebekah is received into the household of Abraham and is married to Isaac. Much like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah remain childless for a long time. They had to wait twenty years for the birth of their twins, Esau and Jacob, because once again God wanted to demonstrate that the fulfillment of His promises is His own work (*Gen. 25:21*). However, the birth of those two baby boys was not just to give an elderly couple some happy days. There is more. God gives them the children because He wants the Saviour of the world to be born, at a future date, from descendants of Abraham.

From the very beginning God made it clear that deliverance from sin comes only from Him. That is what God taught Abraham when He made His covenant with him. God promised him that all nations would be blessed through him, but Abraham had to wait until he was a hundred years old before the promise came true. Now God teaches Isaac the same thing. It also took a miracle for his twins to be born after he had been childless for twenty years. God demands faith in His promises.

The same faith was demanded of Abraham and Isaac, and of Sarah and Rebekah. That same faith is also demanded of us, today. For God, everything is possible (*Luke 1:34-38*). Also Mary, the mother of Jesus, had to learn to accept and to believe this because in the most unbelievable miracle of all God sent His Son into the world. He was born from a virgin, without the intervention of a man (*Matt. 1:18-25*).

Faith is required to accept the miracles of God. Faith means certainty in God.

When Jesus died on the cross to atone for the sins of the world and to reconcile man with God, and when He arose from the grave and ascended into heaven, all people were blessed in Him (*Acts 3:24-26*). At that time the promises made to Abraham were completely fulfilled. The promise that follows applies to all those that believe: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (*John 1:12,13*). This means that Abraham's children are all those "which are of faith" (*Gal. 3:6-9*). And if they are children of Abraham they are children of God (*Rom. 8:14-17*).

Questions for Lesson 10

The Bible Speaks with Authority

1. On several occasions God confirmed the authority of His word through miracles. What sign did God give to Pharaoh through the services of Moses? (*Ex. 4:1-9; Ex. 7:8-13*)
2. How does Jesus prove that He has divine authority? (*Luke 5:17-26*)
3. Why is it important that the prophets communicate what God says and that the apostles witness what they had heard and seen of Jesus? (*Rom. 10:14-17*)

The Preserver

1. What is meant by the "forbearance" of God? (*2 Pet. 3:9*)
2. Sin has caused many changes in the world. Name a few examples. (See *Gen. 3:16-19; Rom. 5:12; Rom. 8:18-23*)
3. God governs all things. How does He do this? (*Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18*)

God Continues with Isaac

1. In seeking a wife for Isaac, the servant of Abraham lets himself be guided by the LORD. How is this evident? (*Gen. 24:10-12*)
2. How does Rebekah show that she sees this marriage proposal as a part of God's guidance? (*Gen. 24:58-61*)
3. How does Isaac also show that he sees this marriage proposal as a part of God's guidance? (*Gen. 24:67*)