

The Living Word

“In the beginning was the Word . . . In Him was life . . . The Word became flesh and dwelt among us . . . No one has ever seen God, but God the One and only, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed Him” (John 1:1,4,14,18).

“In these last days He [God] has spoken to us by His Son . . . the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being” (Hebrews 1:2,3)

“For the Word of God is living and active” (Hebrews 4:12)

Jesus is the “Living Word.” What does that mean? It means that He, by His life, speaks to us. He speaks to us by His Person, that is, all that He is and all that He does, as well as all that He says. Jesus said, **“If you knew me, you would know the Father also”** (John 8:19). In John 12, Jesus said, **“When [a man who believes in Him] looks at me, he sees the One who sent me”** (v. 45), and in Chapter 14, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”** (v. 9b). Jesus reveals God. Not in the way that Scripture does, by means of words on paper, but by the life that He lived. The Scriptures reveal God; the Son reveals God. (The Greek word, *logos*, also can mean deed, though this is an uncommon use. Thus Jesus is the Living Work of God, i.e., becoming human to carry out the work of redeeming a lost humanity. The term, Living Word, thus also has the sense of Jesus as Servant of God.)

In the same way that Scripture comes from God yet was produced by human writers, that is, it’s human yet divine, the Living Word is human yet divine. The Word of God is both human yet transcendent, and the Living Word is both also. We encounter the living God in the Scriptures. Likewise, we encounter the living God by being in relationship with Jesus, the Living Word. And apart from Jesus, no one has or can have a relationship with God. The Word of God is truth. Likewise, the Living Word is truth personified. Jesus said, “I am the living truth, the way to God” (John 14:6, paraphrased). In the same way that our response to the Word of God determines our eternal destiny, our response to Jesus forever determines our destiny (John 3:36). We cannot be passive or indifferent to either the Word of God or to the Living Word. And this: The Bible is in two parts, the Hebrew Scriptures (the O.T.) and the Greek Scriptures (the N.T.). The first part is a story of failure, the second is a story of victory completing the story of the first part. And in the same way, the story of the Living Word is in two parts, the First Advent, which resulted in failure (death of the King on a cross); the Second Advent, when the resurrected King returns in victory, completing what was begun at the First. Jesus is a living revelation of God and His will.

We who are *in Christ* likewise are to reveal God by our lives. We too are like a living Word. Salvation is to change us – thru repentance, mortification and sanctification – so that we pursue active, obedient, righteous lives serving God. To say it differently, Christ is in us to reveal God thru us, thru our lives. We have the Gospels, indeed all the New Testament, to reveal Christ to us so that, seeing and knowing Christ, we see and know the Father. We can then reveal God’s holiness and goodness, and His love. But now I must ask, to *whom* do we reveal God? To others, for certain, so that they may know God too. But we are also to reveal God to God! It’s the image of God in us, so that like a mirror, we reflect God’s perfections. And God is glorified by . . . what else? By His own infinite and consummate glory. As the Son, the Living Word, revealed the Father to the glory of the Father, so we do the same. To reveal God is one reason we’re here; it’s what we’re called to do.

What’s the purpose of Scripture? I can easily identify four great purposes: God’s self-revelation; God’s will for His creation; spiritual truths; and promises. There are a few more purposes, such as, for example, being a record of God’s miraculous acts in history. Let’s briefly discuss the four. First, God is invisible. He’s Spirit, and He’s an infinite Being, which means He doesn’t occupy time and space. So the only way we can know He even exists is if He reveals Himself to us. But one of the purposes of creation is that we, made in His image, might know Him and enjoy Him for an eternity. So Scripture reveals God so that we can know Him, and to know Him is to love Him. Second, God’s will is not, as many church-goers foolishly suppose, good advice. It’s not what He recommends for how we should live. It’s not an option for us. No. God’s will for us consists of authoritative instructions we’re to obey. As Creator and Ruler, He has the right to tell us how to live and fully expect us to obey Him. We have no right to live as we please, apart from His holy will. It’s therefore at our peril that we don’t obey His will revealed in Scripture. God is holy and holiness pervades the cosmos; He thus demands holiness of us. Third, God has wisely and justly instituted many theological truths and we can either read them or using reason discern them in the Scriptures. We would never know these apart from Scripture. And we need to know them to understand life. And fourth, God promises many wonderful blessings for us to be fulfilled in the future. Scripture records these promises for us to know and cherish and wait for them to come true. When Jesus was here on

earth, He fulfilled the role of the Word of God. He revealed God, and His teachings revealed God's will, many spiritual truths, and precious promises for the future. He was truly the Living Word.

Two aspects of the people of Israel were essential to their calling, indeed, *required* for their existence. These were (a) personal purity, and (b) mission. Their purity was to reveal the holy God whom they represented. And their mission was to reveal their holy God to the people of the Gentile nations of the world so that they also might know the Creator God, the God of Israel. To the extent the Nation revealed God and His will for humanity, they were, in a way, like a living Word. The Church is not ethnic Israel, yet in a sense it is an Israel because Christians are *in Christ*, and Christ is the obedient and perfect Israel. So like Israel, the Church has the very same calling and the same two fundamental requirements: (a) personal purity and (b) mission. Why? To fulfill what Israel failed to do, viz, reveal a holy, good and loving God to the world, so that the elect among the Gentile nations will respond with faith and also join to Christ. The Church is also, in a way, like a living Word.

To reveal God to others, we first have to know God. Although the people of Israel had His self-revelation, for the most part they weren't interested in knowing Him. They foolishly went after the gods of the Gentile nations around them. The O.T. is a tragedy unfolding before its readers. The Church has even greater revelation, and the gift of the Spirit to enable us to understand Scripture. So more is expected. To know God requires continual immersion in the Scriptures and the expenditure of time and effort. And it's a life-long undertaking. But knowing God isn't an intellectual exercise, as we would make it out to be. To know the living God is to participate in a personal relationship that begins in the here-and-now but extends into eternity. It involves meditation on the Word and prayerful engagement with God. And as we do this, we increasingly love Him and we gradually become like Him. That's how we're able to reveal God to others. But there's a problem. Are we really any different from Israel? Do we really *want* to know God? Not everyone does, especially in today's world saturated with thousands of distracting interests. How many of us can honestly say with the Psalmist, **"As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."** (Psalm 42:1).

The Bible opens with God creating the cosmos. And He made man uniquely in His own image so that man could reflect to all creation God's holiness and goodness. Immediately after creating, in the strategically placed Genesis Chapter 2, God gave instructions how the man made in His image was to live. Because God is holy and good, humanity needs instructions from God how to live a holy and good life. Apart from those instructions, there's no way such a life could possibly be lived, there's no way the image could reflect God's Person. God's instructions, that is, His revealed will, are absolutely necessary. But something else is essential for God's purpose in creating to be fulfilled: Man has to obey God's will. Thus in Chapter 2 of Genesis, God placed man in His garden "to serve" Him and "to obey" Him (v.15). (Those words, *abad* and *shamar* are sadly mistranslated in our English Bibles.) Those two words are coupled together, meaning they're mutually explicatory. They constitute one function: obedient serving, or serving by obeying. We're here, we exist, to serve God, and we do that by obeying His revealed will. The salvation that God lovingly offers in the Gospel is what enables us, a sinful humanity in thrall to Satan, to fulfill our creation responsibility to serve/obey God, revealing Him and His love to a world of people under judgment.

The greatest reality in all existence is the entrance of the holy and good, living God into the physical world He created in the Person of the Son. There is no greater Person that anyone can know than Jesus, the Jewish Messiah and King, the living God who entered humanity to reveal God. And there is no greater reality that anyone can experience than to join Him, the resurrected and living Lord Jesus, in His continuing outreach to the world. Except that . . . it doesn't happen! At least, not in the Western world. Yes, there are rare individuals who, obeying God, fulfill His will. But other than these, a fair observation (and it's a terribly tragic one) is that it doesn't happen. Why not? Two problems I easily identify: our failure or refusal to serve/obey, and Satan's sabotage of God's will. Let's discuss these.

Satan cunningly used Emperor Constantine to turn Christianity into a passive, spectator religion. He created a professional clergy class (which the emperor, and later in time, kings, could control), and everyone else was "laity." The lay people had no responsibilities other than financially supporting the clergy and, ideally, attending meetings. The clergy carried out the work of the church. Pagan practices brought into the church included the idea that the building used for assembly took on the identity of "church." The lay people simply had to attend Sunday meetings at the building. Being baptized by a clergyman, immediately when born or during infancy, made one a "Christian." The Protestant Reformation changed entry into Christianity from infant baptism to a decision to believe in Jesus. A more biblical understanding of the atonement, a diminished role for the clergy class, and need for wider knowledge of Scripture also

came out of the Reformation, but little else changed. And so today's evangelical Christianity is really based on church tradition going back centuries but not (clergy protestations notwithstanding) based on Scripture. The practice of Christianity is still attending meetings at a building. And Christians are still passive spectators.

In the course of time, biblical values seeped out of the Church and transformed the Western world from brutal paganism into modern civilization. We've received by tradition the need to keep the Ten Commandments, to forgive others, to be kind and to respect others, to work hard, to obey those who by necessity rule over us (i.e., government and its laws), to be responsible to family, to respect life itself and avoid harm to others, and etc. This is civilization; we are civilized people. We hold to the values we've passively received by growing up in America. We show kindness to others, and we don't murder, steal, tell falsehoods or commit adultery. So Christians today see themselves as obeying Scripture. But that would be what I call "passive obedience," a term that's really an oxymoron. Obedience is only obedience if it's *active*, humbly and respectfully (if not lovingly) submitting to someone else's will, done knowingly and willingly. We obey regardless what our own contrary desires or interests might be, regardless whether risks or sacrifice is involved. It's a *doing*. If there's no *doing*, it's not obedience. In today's Western churches, there's hardly any obedience to God's revealed will – regardless how much we suppose we're being obedient. We substitute being civilized for real obedience.

Besides, the commandments to not steal, murder, tell lies or commit adultery are terribly misunderstood. They are presented in Scripture as negatives ("thou shalt not . . ."), but they are meant to be lived out as positives. To not steal, for example, means we're to be generous in giving of our resources to those who are in need. To not be covetous means to seek the blessing and the enrichment of others. To not murder means to be ardently pro-life. Obedience would be living out the *positives* of the Ten Commandments. That's how we would reveal God's holiness and goodness.

We suppose that the Gospel is as follows: We don't have to do anything but believe in Jesus. If we have to obey something, or actually do anything, then that's a "works" religion; but we're under grace. Salvation is a free gift, so once we receive it, we can do as we please because we have the assurance of forgiveness of sin and being in heaven when we die. As far as responsibilities are concerned, the professionals of the church do them. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Sadly, we really don't know the Scriptures, and we don't understand salvation. Let's think about what Paul wrote: "**We** [Paul and those working with him] **received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith**" (Romans 1:5; see also 16:26). He states that faith (or believing) *must* result in obedience to God's revealed will because if there's no obedience, there's no real or genuine trust. What does "trust" mean, after all? Doesn't it mean that what God has commanded is wise, good and just? Doesn't it mean that, because of who He is, God is fully trustworthy? Doesn't it mean we can have total confidence that what He's revealed we're to do is the very best for us? So "faith" without obedience is phony. The absence of obedience means we don't really trust God.

And what's the purpose of salvation? Salvation is not so that we can live a quiet and peaceful life and then be in heaven at the end. Salvation is not a gift we receive unconditionally, as if it's ours to do with as we please. Salvation resolves the great cosmic issue of how sinful humanity can ever be in the presence of an infinitely holy God, but we can go even deeper than that. The goal or purpose of salvation, as I find it in Scripture, is to honor and glorify God. And we can do that *only* by active obedience to His revealed will, which is serving Him with our lives. Forgiveness of sins and the promise of being in heaven is *so that* we honor and glorify God *in this life*. We're saved for a purpose, and that is to reveal God. As Jesus did. As if we're also a living, revealing Word.

An example: A certain woman in Gaza, a believer, was able to forgive the man who, a few years ago, killed her husband. He was taken to a field and murdered because he was an evangelical believer, and he refused the local sheik's demand to become a Muslim. Widowed with three children, she remained there in Gaza City to bear witness to Christ, whom she loves. Whenever she gives her testimony of God's grace in her life and her ability to forgive the murderer, it melts the hearts of those who know only bitterness and vengeance. She reveals God's perfect goodness, holiness and love.

We live in very serious times in a land getting darker by the day. In God's Word are compelling spiritual realities that should grip us and that need to be revealed to our unbelieving neighbors. The consequences of refusing to obey God are too terrible to contemplate. If we're *in Christ*, we need to be just like the Living Word: selfless, humble, obedient, loving, and determined to do the Father's will regardless what humiliation and suffering it involves. So, transformed by the Word of God and empowered by the Spirit, let us commit to faithfully fulfilling our responsibilities as believers.

Humans were created to know and experience and glorify the living eternal God. A world of people needs to know that.