

Things Surely to be Believed, Part 1

by Ray C. Stedman

During World War II, when the western Pacific battle was being fought back and forth across the green jungles of Guadalcanal island, one of the many American airmen who were shot down found himself on a neighboring island which had a reputation of being inhabited by cannibals. He wondered what would happen to him. Sure enough, he hadn't been on the ground very long before some of the natives found him and took him to their village. But when he got to their village he discovered they were not cannibals – they were Christians! He was not a Christian, but a pagan young American. He would have to wait a long time in this village before he could be restored to his outfit. One day, as he was going out the door of the hut in which he lived, he saw one of these natives sitting at his door reading his Bible. The American airman sneeringly said, "What in the world are you reading? Do you believe in that book? Why, in America we have long since learned that that book is just a lot of myth and fable. There is no use wasting your time reading a book like that." The former cannibal didn't say anything for a moment. Then he pointed to a big black iron pot beside his fire, and said, "If it weren't for this book, you would be in that pot!"

That is rather dramatic evidence of the power of the Scriptures to change the human heart. Sometimes we tend to forget this transforming power of the Word of God. But the writer of Hebrews was not kidding when he said, in Chapter 4, Verse 12, that 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." Surely there is no sharper instrument than the Word of the living God to get way down inside the human life and change us by cutting away the cancer of sin and delivering us from the chains which have enslaved us. In our study of the

Scriptures, I hope we will always bear in mind this great fact: God's Word is a word of power. We get so familiar with this Word, either in general or in particular, that we sometimes forget the tremendous power which is hidden away in it.

Remember that in First Corinthians 1:18 Paul says, "the word of the cross ... is the power of God." I remember hearing Dr. Dick Halverson tell about speaking to a group of students one night. During a question-and-answer period, one of them asked him, "Dr. Halverson, how can I make the Word of God relevant to the situation in which I live?" He was about to answer that question when time ran out and he had to carry it over to the next night. During the intervening day he was thinking about that question. "The longer I thought about it," he said, "the more I began to see the underlying egotism of a question like that: 'How can I make the Word of God relevant?'" He thought of the above verse: "the word of the cross ... is the power of God." When the time came to answer the question he said: "I would like simply to substitute for the phrase the Word of God' in this question what the Word of God says is the equivalent: 'the power of God.' The question then would read this way: 'How can I make the power of God relevant? How can I, a puny human creature, make that which is the power of God meaningful to human life?' Well, that is the most egotistical of questions, isn't it?" As Charles Spurgeon once said about the Bible: "You are wasting your time defending it. You don't need to defend the Bible. The Bible is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Turn it loose; it will defend itself!" The Scriptures are like that.

In this series of studies we have seen that the purpose of the Old Testament is to prepare us to receive truth from God. We never will receive it

unless we are prepared. I realize that many of us begin our Christian encounter by reading the New Testament; and to us, at first, the New Testament speaks with much more clarity and purpose to our own situations than the Old Testament. Unfortunately, many of us never seem to get around to reading the Old Testament. But I am convinced, after years of observation both in my own life and in the lives of others, that we can only go so far in appropriating the truths of the New Testament without beginning to get hold of the Old Testament. If we do not, at a certain stage in our life, begin to read and understand and appropriate the message of the Old Testament, we cannot take in all the riches of the New. These two books are made to go together. We can go only so far in the New until we have begun to lay hold of the Old.

We have already seen in the Old Testament that the first five books, Genesis through Deuteronomy, set out for us the pattern of God's working in our lives. And God will never work in any other way than by this great pattern that he has set forth. If you would like to understand how God will work with you, you will see it in these first five books. They are followed by the historical books – Joshua through Esther. We saw that their purpose is to set forth the perils which confront us in living the Christian life in a 20th Century world. If you want to understand the opposing forces in all their terrible oppression of the human heart, their sly subtlety and their cruel destructiveness, spend time in these historical books. They are marvelously instructive in this way. They are followed, in turn, by what we call the poetical books – Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon. These express the protests and rejoicings of the heart exposed to the perils of the world and entering into the pattern of God. There is not a single emotion to which the human heart is subject that isn't found in these poetical books. If you want to understand yourself, this is the part of the Old Testament to which you need to turn.

Now we come to the books of the great prophets of the Old Testament. There are sixteen of them. We will review the first eight in this study, and then will finish them in the next. We cannot dwell long on them, but in brief compass we want to discover what each has to say to us. **If**

- The pattern is given in the Pentateuch, and

- The perils are set forth in the historical books and
- The protests of the spirit and soul are expressed in the poetical books, **then**
- In the prophets we discover the mighty promises of God.

What is a promise? At many weddings someone sings *Oh, Promise Me*. When two young people stand at the wedding altar and promise each other, what are they doing? They are committing themselves to give of themselves to each other. A promise, basically, is a commitment to share yourself. If you give a promise to someone, you are committing something of your time, your energy, your resources to that person.

If you say, "I'll meet you at the corner of such-and-such street at such-and-such time," you have thereby committed a certain part of yourself to that person for a certain length of time.

That is what a promise is. It is a sharing of self.

So, the great promises of the Bible are the efforts of God to share himself with us. When we understand the promises, we will understand something more of the nature and the character of our God. Every promise is a commitment on God's part to give of himself. This is why an understanding of the prophets is of such momentous importance to us in reading the Bible, because it is here that we understand what God says he will do. How can you exercise faith if you don't have a promise? So often people prate on and on about faith and belief, and yet they never say anything about what to believe or what your faith should rest upon.

Do you remember the song popular a few years ago entitled *I Believe*? That is all it says: "I believe."

- "I believe for every drop of rain that falls" something else happens.
- "Whenever a baby cries" someone is around to feed it!

It never does say why. That song always bothered me – it kept saying all these wonderful things to believe, but never one word of why.

Faith is of absolutely no value if it does not rest upon a promise. A promise is the fact upon which faith lays hold, and it pulls feeling right along behind, and thus makes available to the heart all that God wants to give.

What is the promise of the book of **Isaiah**, the first of the prophets? One of the mightiest books in the Bible, it is essentially the promise of the cleansing of God, the promise of a new beginning. You see this right in the first chapter. One of the key verses of this book is Verse 18 of Chapter 1:

**“Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.” {Isa 1:18
RSV}**

The promise of a new beginning!

We see it in the experience of the prophet himself in the sixth chapter – in that transcending vision when Isaiah stood in the temple and saw the Almighty on a throne, high and lifted up; and the seraphim (angels) gathered around rank upon rank, and one called to another and said, “Holy, holy, holy...” and smoke filled the temple. As the prophet fell down before this majestic, awesome sight, he cried (Verse 5):

**... “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;” {Isa 6:5b
RSV}**

Do you remember what happened? An angel took a burning coal from the altar, touched Isaiah’s lips with it and declared his guilt taken away and his sin forgiven – the promise of the new beginning. Then God said to him, in the great commissioning service, “who will go for us?” And Isaiah stood up and said, “Here I am! Send me.” The promise is repeated in what is perhaps the most marvelous chapter in the Bible, the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, where, through the twilight of prophetic vision, there suddenly breaks forth the glorious figure of the Messiah hanging upon a cross – the One who

**was wounded for our transgressions,
he was bruised for our iniquities;**

**upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,
and with his stripes we are healed.
(Verse 5)**

In some ways Isaiah is the most glorious book in the Bible. I have come to love it, for it declares that whenever we discover that in some weakness or faltering failure we have stumbled off into sin and darkness and despair, nevertheless God always has a place of new beginning.

I wish every one of you could have heard the artless eloquence with which a lovely young Christian woman recently told her story to our young people. She told how she had drifted into a life of violence, crime, dope, sadism, filth, and shocking, sordid, repulsive living. In the midst of all that, her heart was hungering for deliverance. But she never found it until she came to the foot of the cross. There she found life – in the transforming message which came to her in utter simplicity, without any emotion connected with it, telling her that if she would give her heart to Jesus Christ she would be a new creature in Christ. This is the story of Isaiah – the promise of a new beginning.

In the book of **Jeremiah** we have exactly the opposite. Jeremiah is the promise of the absence of God. Did you know that God promises to be absent from your life, under certain conditions? Not that he actually is absent, because he never is from anyone – God pervades the universe – but he promises to leave us without any sense of his fellowship or of his person. He does this deliberately, under certain conditions. This is the message of Jeremiah. It corresponds to the New Testament promise given in the words of our Lord to Jerusalem:

“Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed be he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Luke 13:35 {RSV})

Throughout the whole Bible you have references to this fact – that when, in some incredible vanity, we attempt to match strength with the Almighty, and we refuse to bow our wills to his, God will ultimately let us have our way, and we wander off into weakness and darkness and misery and desolation of spirit, exactly as Jerusalem was left, finally – desolate. Jeremiah was sent to that

bleeding city to declare to them that their city was lost, and that they were going into captivity for seventy years. But the book closes with a bright ray of light. God never leaves us lost. When the heart repents and turns back, then Isaiah's word is operative – the promise of a new beginning.

Ezekiel's book is the promise of the presence of God, as Jeremiah's was the promise of the absence of God. It is the Old Testament book which sets forth the corresponding promise in the New Testament: "If a man loves me," Jesus said in John 14:23, "he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." This great prophecy of Ezekiel begins with a vision of God which is the most remarkable, transcending vision in the whole Bible.

I have in my library an interesting pamphlet someone gave me which attempts to explain the opening chapters of Ezekiel as being his record of a visit by creatures from outer space, but that is rather far-fetched, I am afraid.

This is a book which sets forth what God is like. It opens with this marvelous vision of God and closes with the Temple of God, where God is at rest with his people. In between it shows how God moves to bring about his presence in the human heart.

Daniel is the great predictive book of the Old Testament and is the book that sets forth the promise of the illumination of the human mind by God. It corresponds to Jesus' New Testament promise, given in John 8:12: "he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

This is one of the greatest books I know of for teenagers. I urge every teenager to read the book of Daniel again and again and again.

It is the story of a teenager in captivity, in a hostile environment, having to stand against all the powerfully sweeping forces of the world of his day, and of how God enabled him to stand firm against the pressure of that environment, and to be God's instrument of blessing in the greatest nation of the world of his day. It goes on to show how God illuminated this man's mind to enable him to see through all the deceptive phoniness of the philosophy of his day; to perceive the truth of the living God and what God was doing in that nation; and to predict what God would do with all the nations

down through the course of history, even beyond our own day.

Hosea, in many ways, is the most beautiful book in the Bible. It is a love story – the story of a broken marriage and of the heartache which unfaithfulness brings into a life. It is a story of the persistence of God, the promise of God's persistent redemptive action. It sets forth the New Testament promise of Philippians 1:6: "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." It is wonderful story of how God sent Hosea to marry a harlot. And when she left him and went back to her evil trade, God sent him back to her again to take her to himself. This woman led Hosea through heartbreak and shame and humiliation, but God kept his heart aflame with love for her, and finally she was won back and restored. It is a marvelous story, beautifully picturing the love of God.

In **Joel** you have the promise of the ultimate meaning of human events. If you are troubled by what is going on in the world, read the book of Joel. Here is the corresponding New Testament promise of Romans 8:28: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Joel shows how God is at work among the nations, shaping events and bringing about his purposes, so that even the tragedies and the catastrophes which befall us are part of the warp and woof of the fabric of history that God is weaving.

The book of **Amos** is the book of the promise of perfection, corresponding to that glorious promise in Jude :24, "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing..." The message of the book of Amos is that God will never let down his standards. We want him to. We say: "Lord, I have grown. I am so much better than I was ten years ago that it amazes even me. Don't you think I've gone far enough now? Just let me stay here." But Amos comes along and says: "No. God will never be content with this, will never rest, will never give up until he has brought you through to the absolute perfection of Jesus Christ." The plumb line of God is the great theme of Amos.

Obadiah is the promise of spiritual victory. It is the story of two men, Jacob and Esau, who, respectively, are the symbols of walking in the Spirit and walking in the flesh. Any of us who have felt at times as though we wanted to reach inside our hearts, take hold of this evil that dwells in our flesh and tear it out by the roots will find encouragement in the book of Obadiah. This book is the equivalent of the New Testament promise in Romans 6:14: "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." This is the book which declares that the flesh is always a failure, but that the Spirit will always triumph: We walk in the Spirit; we shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. The book ends with these marvelous

words, which I hope are true of every one of us as we walk with the Lord:

... the kingdom shall be the Lord's. {Ob 1:21 RSV}

This is what we want in our lives, isn't it? The kingdom of our lives shall be the Lord's. We ourselves know best of all how difficult this is and how much we are fighting this in God's program. We ourselves are the greatest obstacles to our lives becoming the Lord's kingdom. But God has a way around that, too. The book of Obadiah is the promise of that victory.

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