

Visions from the Lord

***“I was not
disobedient unto
the heavenly
vision.”
—Acts 26:19***

During the time when the Bible was in course of preparation, much of God’s instructions and warnings to his people, as well as the revelation of his plans and purposes, were imparted by means of “visions.” These visions were frequently, if not always, of a miraculous nature and so impressive that they left no doubt in the minds of those to whom they were given that the information provided was from the Lord.

These visions were not given to satisfy curiosity, but in order that those receiving them might be equipped to co-operate with the Lord in the out-working of his plans, either for themselves or for others, or for both. In many instances, visions are referred to in the Scriptures as the “voice” of the Lord speaking to his people. A glance through the Bible is sufficient to impress one with the importance that God placed upon obedience to his voice and the dire consequences which would result from disobedience.

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Old Testament Visions

God spoke to Noah not merely that he might know of the coming flood, but in order that he might make preparation for the saving of himself and his family. (Gen. 6:13-18; Heb. 11:7) God also spoke to Abraham in Ur, told him of his purpose to bless all the families of the earth, and gave him instructions to leave his own people and go to a land which he would show him. The blessings to be derived from this contact with the Lord depended upon Abraham's obedience to these instructions.—Gen. 12:1-3

God revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush and commissioned him to be a great deliverer of his people. Even the ground on which Moses was standing at the time the vision was given to him became holy, or sanctified, for God was using it as the place where he was imparting information to his servant as to what he wanted him to do. (Exod. 3:1-10) If Moses from then on was to enjoy the continued favor of the Lord, he had no alternative but to obey the vision.

The Prophet Isaiah was given a vision in which he saw the Lord "high and lifted up." (Isa. 6:1,8) In this vision, Isaiah heard the Lord asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" The prophet's response was, "Here am I; send me." This directive in reality was the meaning of most of the visions with which the Lord favored his people in ancient times, although not always so plainly stated.

New Testament Visions

The most notable vision mentioned in the New Testament was the one given to John the Baptist at the time of Jesus' baptism. John saw the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus and heard "a voice from

heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:16,17; John 1:31-34) Here, at the age of thirty, Jesus was beginning his earthly ministry. He had come to perform the will of his Heavenly Father—all that had been written in the "volume of the book," the Old Testament. (Ps. 40:6-8; Heb. 10:5-9) All the instructions written in the Old Testament for the guidance of the Master were recorded under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There had been no one to interpret their meaning. Even for the perfect mind of Jesus to comprehend their import it was necessary that he be given a special revelation—a vision—and it was this with which he was blessed when the heavens were opened unto him.

Jesus had come to do the things that had been written concerning him. When their meaning was revealed, he unhesitatingly entered upon the task of performing them. At what great cost did Jesus obey the heavenly vision! The period of his ministry was short, and every day was a tiring one. He was reviled by his enemies, misunderstood by his friends, and the great "contradiction of sinners" finally resulted in his arrest, trial, and cruel crucifixion. (Heb. 12:3) This was the meaning of the vision. Jesus was to be led "as a lamb to the slaughter." (Isa. 53:7) He was to give his flesh "for the life of the world." (John 1:29; 6:51) He was to be "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Isa. 53:3) He was obedient to his Heavenly Father in all these difficult experiences. He learned what it meant to be obedient even when passing through severe experiences of suffering.—Heb. 2:10; 5:8

To offset the cost of obedience, the Master experienced also a rich reward even while he was laying

down his life. The peace and joy he experienced more than compensated for the sacrifice he was making. (John 14:27) Indeed, it was this that enabled him to obey “for the joy that was set before him,” and to endure “the cross, despising the shame.” (Heb. 12:2) True, this was a future joy; but the anticipation of it, and his complete confidence that he would receive the promised reward, gave Jesus a present peace and joy which the world could neither give nor take away. Thus, while he was “a man of sorrows,” he was undoubtedly at peace with his Heavenly Father. The “joy of the Lord” was his strength.—Neh. 8:10

Paul's Vision

Saul of Tarsus had always been a zealous servant of God, although at first he had been wrong in his understanding of what the Lord wanted him to do. It was on an errand of misdirected service that he was favored with that revealing vision mentioned in our opening text, and concerning which he later testified that he had not been disobedient. It was this vision that halted Saul in his wrong course. It revealed to him the place he was to occupy as a fellow-sufferer with Christ, and the task he was to perform as the apostle to the Gentiles.—Acts 9:1-16

As far as Paul's earthly service for Christ was concerned, perhaps the briefest summary of its deep implications for Paul is given in the statement made to Ananias, when the Lord, in a vision, commissioned him to tell Saul what great things he was to suffer for his name's sake. (vs. 16) Obedience to the heavenly vision did mean much suffering for Paul. (II Cor. 11:23-28; 12:7-10) In this he rejoiced, for the vision revealed that he had the

privilege of suffering with his Master in the great Messianic cause.—Col. 1:24

These sufferings came as a result of his obedience to the vision—obedience in making known to others what the Lord had miraculously revealed to him. After declaring to Agrippa that he had not been disobedient to the vision, Paul added, “But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.” (Acts 26:20) It was “for these causes,” Paul explained to the king, that he was accused by his fellow Jews. (vs. 21) The result was that he continued to be persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles until, finally, he finished his earthly course.—II Tim. 4:7,8; Acts 20:17-25

Because Paul had implicit faith in the Lord and knew that nothing would be permitted to come into his life that was not for his highest spiritual welfare, he enjoyed rest of mind and heart. He had no rest, though, from the impelling urgency of laying down his life in obedience to the heavenly vision. Whether in Jewish synagogues, in heathen temples, on shipboard, or in prison, the one consuming passion of his life was to impart to others the meaning of that heavenly vision. The knowledge which had been revealed to him was that Jesus was the Christ and that the hope of both the church and the world centered in him as the Redeemer. The vision further identified Christ as the one who was to reign until all enemies were put under his feet, even the great enemy death.—I Tim. 2:5-7; I Cor. 1:23; 15:25,26

Paul's faithfulness did not end with bearing witness to the Gospel of Christ. He was zealous in his service to the brethren and did not shrink from declaring unto them "all the counsel of God." (Acts 20:27) He was a faithful defender of the faith and outspoken in his opposition to the spirit of carnality in the church. He emphasized that Christ is the true head of the church and that for his brethren to say, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," is inappropriate.—I Cor. 3:4

The End of the Age

Prophecies by Paul, Peter, and John all assure us that the Lord's people at the end of the present age would be blessed with an increased understanding of the plans and purposes of God. The Master's own testimony is to the same effect. In describing the manner of his return and Second Presence, Jesus said, "as the lightning [Greek: bright shining] comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming [Greek: presence] of the Son of Man." (Matt. 24:27, *English Standard Version*) How beautiful is the figure of a sunrise, which Jesus used to illustrate the gradual dawning of the light of Truth in the day of his presence. Although this dawning has been gradual, eventually the full and clear brightness of his presence will banish the darkness of all evil, ignorance, superstition, and sin. While we are assured that ultimately, and as a result of the Master's presence, the "knowledge of the glory of the LORD" shall fill the whole earth "as the waters cover the sea," the Master's own disciples are the first to be illuminated by the light of his presence.—Hab. 2:14

Using a further illustration of the Truth which would be given to the household of faith at the end of the age, Jesus explained that when he returned he would serve them with “meat in due season.” (Matt. 24:45-47; Luke 12:37) The combined testimony of Jesus and the apostles reveals that the Lord’s people at this time should expect to be blessed with further understanding of Truths recorded in the Bible. However, there is nothing in the Scriptures to indicate that this latter-day vision would be given by God in a miraculous manner such as in the past when he illuminated the minds of the prophets, the apostles, and our Lord Jesus. Further visions of this sort are no longer necessary, for all the plans and purposes of God are now recorded in the Scriptures.

We have reason to believe that a special understanding of the Word of God has been given to his people in this end of the age and in the manner indicated in the prophecies. What we must discover is whether or not this understanding is in fact the plan of God and the vision which had been mostly lost sight of during the many centuries of the Dark Ages. We must examine whether it is in harmony with, and is the sum total of, the promises and prophecies of the Word of God.

God’s Plan

Do we, then, at this present time, have the message of Truth? When it comes to an understanding of the entire plan of God for human redemption and salvation, we cannot properly judge Truth from error simply by examining one or even several individual points of doctrine. What we must first identify is the central theme of God’s plan and the

great objective to which every detail of that plan is leading. What is it that comes to light as we look into the prophecies and promises of the Word of God? It is the fact that God purposes to establish a kingdom here on earth which will quell the rebellion of fallen humanity against his sovereign will, and that mankind, by accepting God's provision of life through Christ, may be restored to perfection and live forever.

Jesus summed up this great theme when he taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10) The Prophet Isaiah reveals that the accomplishment of this divine purpose is not dependent upon the frail arm of flesh, but that "the government shall be upon his [Jesus'] shoulder," and that "the zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this."—Isa. 9:6,7

This great theme permeates the Word of God. It simply means that the divine purpose is the outline of what God will do for man's eventual blessing. The church fell away from this fundamental Truth of the Bible for many centuries. Instead of praying and waiting for the kingdom of God to rule and bless the world, a man-made kingdom was gradually set up by uniting church and state. This was called Christendom and, while the power and influence of that system is now much less, the underlying principle upon which it was based still governs the thinking and actions of those who are not enlightened by God's holy word. That principle seems to be that unless man does God's work for him, it will not be done at all. The result of this is that many are presently blind to the fact that God has a plan for the blessing of the nations and will carry out that plan regardless of human help.

Disappointment—Then Understanding

Prior to the great revealment of Truth at this end of the age, students of the prophecies, such as William Miller and others during the first half of the nineteenth century, had discovered, by the signs of the times and by certain prophecies, that the return of the Master was close at hand. They suffered disappointment in their expectations, however, because of a failure to understand the manner of Christ's return, supposing that he would come as a human with nail prints in his hands and feet. They had overlooked the fact that he had given his flesh for the life of the world and had been raised from the dead a glorious divine being, invisible to human eyes. Hence, when he returned he would be present invisibly, "as a thief," unrecognized by all except those who were "watching" for, and noting, the fulfillment of the prophecies.—Rev. 16:15; Matt. 24:42,43

Not too long after, in the latter half of the 1800's, a group of earnest students of the Bible had, over a considerable period of time, studied the prophecies. One of the great Truths which became clear as a result of that study was the object of the Lord's return. The Scriptures showed that he was to return to restore mankind to life, not to destroy the earth, and that the prophetic end of the world was in reality the end of the present evil social order, and the establishment of a new order, a "new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness." (II Pet. 3:13) In Acts 3:20,21, the Apostle Peter spoke about the plan of God that was to be accomplished through and by Christ during his Second Presence. He described it as "times of restitution of all things," and adds that it was this of which God had testified

“by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” This was the voice of God—the vision—as heard and made manifest to Peter and to us by the prophets.

The Vision Today

The vision of Truth that has reached us today in God’s appointed way, and in which we are rejoicing, is all-comprehensive. It embraces the meaning of all the great visions which God gave to his people in ancient times. Noah may not have understood this vision as we have it today, or realized that his experiences concerning the ending of that world prefigured the “days of the Son of man” in which we are now living, nearing the end of this “present evil world.” (Matt. 24:37-39; Gal. 1:4) Yet, it was a blessed thing for Noah to be informed of the coming flood and to be granted the privilege of service that he had in connection with it.

How Abraham must have rejoiced when God informed him of his purpose to bless all the families of the earth through his seed! He did not know, however, that this “seed” of blessing was to be a faith seed made up of Jesus and his body members who suffer and die with him that they might live and reign with him.—Gal. 3:16,27-29

Moses was awe-inspired when he saw the burning bush and heard the voice of God instructing him to take off his shoes, for the place on which he stood was holy ground. He learned that he was to be the deliverer of his people from Egypt and to be their lawgiver. He was given little insight, however, of the greater deliverance that was to come to all mankind, and of the reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles to God under the terms of the New Covenant. While

it is true that Moses prophesied that one greater than he was to come, like the other prophets of the Old Testament, it is doubtful if he understood very clearly the implications of this and others of his prophecies.—Deut. 18:15-19; Acts 3:22-26; 7:37; Heb. 12:18-24

Isaiah saw the Lord “high and lifted up,” and he was inspired with the sight to do the bidding of such an exalted and holy one, but his vision of God did not fully reveal the glories of the divine character as we see them today. Isaiah did not understand, as we are privileged to do, the marvelous depth and harmony of God’s attributes—his wisdom, justice, love, and power—so aptly represented in the “seraphims” that he saw in his vision.—Isa. 6:1-8

When the heavens were opened to Jesus there was revealed to him the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the purpose of his earthly ministry—that he was to suffer and die for mankind. It was not possible then to state those matters fully to his disciples, for as Jesus said, they were not able to “bear them now.” (John 16:12) When later Jesus did open up the Scriptures to them concerning the meaning of his death, their hearts burned within them, as they gained a greater understanding of these things.—Luke 24:32

It was at Pentecost when the meaning of the vision was enlarged to include the “call” of the church. (Acts 2:36-39) Then the footstep followers of Christ learned more fully of their privilege to suffer and die with the Master, thus to share in the “better sacrifices” of this age. (Heb. 9:23) This precious Truth was also lost sight of during the Dark Ages, but it is part of the glorious vision with which we have been blessed today.

The vision to which Paul was not disobedient was glorious in all its implications. In it, he saw that the plan of God had progressed to include the Gentiles and the offering to them of the opportunity to become fellow heirs with the Jews in the kingdom promises. (Eph. 2:11-22) Later, Paul was given other visions. He was “caught up to the third heaven” and to “paradise”—a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness”—and saw things which he was not permitted to utter because it was not then the due time. (II Cor. 12:1-4; II Pet. 3:13) Today, we also can see, by the eye of faith, the “third heaven” and know what Paul saw in “paradise.” He saw God’s purpose of a future restitution accomplished, and the entire human race living in a world-wide Eden of perfection of life and peace on earth. (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 36:33-36) Paul was not permitted to declare what he saw, but we are bidden by our vision to tell the whole world the blessed tidings of Christ’s kingdom soon to be established!—Matt. 24:14; II Tim. 4:2

Responsibility for Truth

As we have noted, when in ancient times God gave visions to his servants, they were in the nature of commissions for service. It is the same in connection with the vision of Truth with which God has favored us. There is something for us to do about it. It is to us also a commission of service, as well as a commission that includes conditions and qualifications which must be met in order for our service to be “holy, acceptable unto God.”—Rom. 12:1

We want our hands to be used in God’s service. We want our feet to be swift in carrying the message

of divine love to “comfort all that mourn.” (Isa. 61:2) We desire to use our lips and our tongues to tell of his love. Indeed, if we internalize the proper spirit of the vision, we will want all that we possess to be used in God’s service. “Nothing, Lord, would I withhold,” is what we will say to him who has opened the eyes of our understanding to behold his glory. We will gladly devote our all to him.

All of this is included in our full obedience to the heavenly vision. Paul wrote that we should bring “every thought” into obedience to Christ. (II Cor. 10:5) Nothing short of this will be wholly pleasing to the Lord. Christ said that we should let our light shine and, in addition, outlined the many qualifications of righteousness which will make our light bearing acceptable to God. (Matt. 5:16; Phil. 2:15) Let us, then, yield ourselves fully to the power of the Truth and, in our obedience to the vision, rejoice in whatever experiences may result. The time is short. Let us be faithful while the opportunity is still ours. ■

The Privilege of Anointing the “Feet” of Christ is Still With Us

*Oh, wash the “feet” with kindness,
With sympathy and with love,
Oh, comfort and refresh them
For they’re HIS, our Lord above.*

*If we wash the “feet” with kindness
Blessed “feet” of Christ, divine,
Then we have our Lord’s approval,
Blest assurance: “Thou art mine!”*

—*Pebbles and Poesies, Bessie V. M. Sennewald*