

The Heavens Were Opened

“Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”
—Matthew 3:16,17

WHEN JESUS WAS THIRTY

years of age, he symbolized his total commitment to God by presenting himself to John to be baptized at Jordan. He received the Holy Spirit of God, symbolized by the dove, without measure, and the heavens of spiritual understanding pertaining to the divine program were opened to him. He also heard the voice of his loving Heavenly Father proclaim, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’

This was the central feature in God’s plan for mankind’s recovery from the death penalty because of sin. Jesus had been prepared for the atonement work that he had come to earth to accomplish. John was a witness to the unfolding events that took place at that time, and we, too, are blessed by

our Lord's ministry. "Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."—Heb.12:2

NO MAN CAN SEE GOD

Visions of various kinds were given for a very special purpose, and there are several occurrences recorded in the Bible. It is a supernatural occurrence that is presented to a person's mind. If it was received during waking hours the impression was made on the conscious mind and could be recalled later. If it happened during the night time it was perhaps impressed on the subconscious mind while the recipient slept.

We are not to suppose that any human being has ever seen God because this is not possible. John has written, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him."—John 1:18

Thus does the 'Son' declare the Heavenly Father. This was explained by Jesus when Philip asked him to show him the Father. "Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? (John 14: 9) This was also addressed by the Apostle Paul when he made clear, "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory."—I Tim. 3:16

THE DIVINE PURPOSE

Jesus was distinct from all others by way of his Heavenly Father's acceptance of his commitment to him. The Scriptures also record other instances in which God gave special instructions, insight, or understanding to a particular servant whom he had selected to participate in some part of the divine program. We are not always given the details as to how this was done, or whether it was by way of a vision or a dream of some kind. However, to a greater or lesser extent many of God's servants were taken into his confidence and used to further his ultimate plan and design for the reconciliation of the world. When the divine purpose is understood it reveals the true character of our loving and eternal Heavenly Father.

GOD RESPECTED ABEL

For example, in the early days of human creation, Abel was granted sufficient knowledge of the wonderful character of God to faithfully present to him a more valuable and significant offering than did his brother Cain. The account reads, "In process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell."—Gen. 4:3-5

ENOCH WALKED WITH GOD

Enoch was another servant who understood enough of God's character and plan to enable him to walk with God. (Gen. 5:24) Furthermore, he was

used to prophesy the wonderful news that the Lord would eventually come with myriads of his saints to execute judgments in the earth.—Jude 14,15

NOAH A MAN OF FAITH

Noah also walked with God (Gen. 6:9) and, was given detailed instructions concerning the flood that was to overtake the world in his day. (vss. 13-22) Many centuries later, the Apostle Paul wrote, “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.” (Heb. 11:7) Noah faithfully carried out his part in God’s arrangements, and willingly cooperated with the divine plan and purpose. The scriptural record which he provided gives us valuable information pertaining to the closing features of that ancient world or age.

ABRAHAM’S SEED

God communicated with Abraham in a very special way, and from the scriptural record we read, “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised.”—Heb. 11:8-11

Abraham received news that through his seed the whole sin-sick human family was to be blessed in God's due time and arrangement. "By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice."—Gen. 22:16-18

MOSES WAS CALLED

God revealed his will to Moses in a burning bush. "The angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I."—Exod. 3:2-4

Moses learned that God was going to deliver his people Israel from bondage. "The LORD said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the

Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.”—vss. 7-9

God then told Moses what he wanted him to do. “Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharoah, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God, “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharoah, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (vss. 10,11) He felt incompetent to do what was asked of him, but God reassured him, “He said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain.”—vs. 12

ISAIAH’S VISION

The Prophet Isaiah received a wonderful vision from God, and he recorded it for our blessing. He wrote, “In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a

people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.”—Isa. 6:1-5

‘HIGH AND LIFTED UP’

In Isaiah’s account, he acknowledges that it truly was a vision from God, for he said, ‘I saw also the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple.’ In varying degrees God has given visions to those whom he wishes to take into his confidence and special service. In Isaiah’s case, he saw the LORD sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up. Those to whom God has truly revealed himself have seen him in a similar manner. They have been made to realize that he is God who they delight to worship and serve.

As the vision unfolded, he heard the voice of God and explained, “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me.”—vss. 6-8

THE TEMPLE OF GOD

Not only did Isaiah see God high and lifted up and that his train filled the temple, but he realized from what he saw, that the LORD’s presence and influence permeated and hallowed everything within the temple. Thus from henceforth, God’s influence would dominate his every thought, word and deed. There was to be no place for anything else in his life. If we are to be temples of the living God the same must be true of us. “Know ye not

that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?”—I Cor. 3:16

An indication from the seraphim would surely reassure Isaiah of the implications of what he was seeing and hearing, and they proclaimed, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The prophet knew that he had seen a vision because the whole earth at that time was far from being filled with the glory of the LORD.

However, this assertion assured him that the time was yet coming when this would be true. By responding to God’s call for service, he would thus be joining in a cause that was destined to bring this to fulfillment in God’s due time. ‘And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.’ He realized that he was utterly unworthy of the opportunity that was being offered to him. ‘Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.’

WEAKNESS OF THE FLESH

We note two thoughts that Isaiah expressed in these scriptures. He knew this heavenly vision meant that he was being called into the divine service. He also considered the glorious character of God, and was struck with the sense of his own sins and lack of ability to enter upon such a sacred and exalted ministry. Being a man of unclean lips, he could not adequately and acceptably show forth the praises and glory of the one whom the seraphim were proclaiming as ‘holy, holy, holy.’

Isaiah soon discovered that the LORD knew all about his unclean condition according to the flesh, and in spite of this he was calling him to service. He realized that the LORD did not intend to use his lips while they were unclean, but had made provision whereby they could be cleansed. What wondrous grace is here manifest. It reveals God's ability to use those who are imperfect by making a provision whereby they can serve him in spite of the handicap of Adamic sin.

THE PROPHET'S RESPONSE

When Isaiah responded in the affirmative to God's invitation, he received his instructions. "He said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate."—Isa. 6:9-11

From the human standpoint this was not a very bright prospect for the prophet as he entered upon the divine service. The LORD was warning him that in going forth in service he must not expect that the people would rally to the cause. He must expect rather, that his entire ministry may seem to end in failure. However, the LORD wanted Isaiah to know that he was to continue in the service even though no results were visible. He asked the prophet to go and speak for him whether or not those who heard

appreciated it. He wanted him to sound forth the LORD's praises because he had seen his glory, and could not refrain from proclaiming what he had seen. Isaiah caught the meaning of what was implied in the vision and was faithful to it.

APOSTLE PAUL'S VISION

Paul was especially called as a minister of God, and in a vision he heard him say, "Rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee."—Acts 26:16

The significance of this miraculous event was that the apostle was being invited by God to spend the remaining days of his life in his service, and to witness for the resurrected Lord Jesus. This was a major change in Paul's life because he had been in direct opposition to the purpose of God as it was then being worked out in the hearts and lives of his people. He had previously persecuted Jesus' followers, and even had some of them put to death. But, he was made to realize that in persecuting the followers of Christ, he was also persecuting Christ himself. As an ardent Jew he was enthusiastic about the Messianic purpose, but now it was revealed to him that he was opposing that very purpose.

A NEW RELATIONSHIP

The far-reaching implications of this wonderful invitation to Paul involved a new and deep relationship with God and a life of total devotion to the Truth. He knew the vision would have more than just a passing effect in his life. It meant more than

merely refraining from further persecutions of the Lord's people and purpose. Not only was he wrong in persecuting these Christians, but God was also calling him to espouse his great plan and ultimate purpose concerning the sin-sick human family. He would be called upon to suffer and die for the Truth and his newfound relationship with our Lord Jesus.

When Paul spoke to King Agrippa he provided some of the important details of his remarkable conversion. He explained, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me. And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks. And I said, Who art thou, Lord? And he said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest."—Acts 26:9-15

A STUDENT OF SCRIPTURE

Before experiencing this vision, Paul had been a zealous and devoted student of the Hebrew

Scriptures, and had a deep faith in the ancient fathers. He was surely familiar with the many incidents of the past in which God had favored some of his ancient prophets with special visions which also changed the entire course of their lives. He had no doubt studied the prophecies of Isaiah.

Being thus acquainted with the manner in which God authorizes his special servants to lay down their lives for him, the apostle knew instantly when he was struck down on the Damascus road that God had put his hand upon him, and was calling him to a special service. It was in response to this conviction that he lifted up his heart and voice to the Lord. "He trembling and astonished said, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do? And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the city, and it shall be told thee what thou must do."—Acts 9:6

THE APOSTLE'S RESPONSE

Paul's vision came to him under different circumstances from those in which the Lord revealed himself to Isaiah. Nevertheless, the importance of the vision was the same. Paul received a glimpse of the divine character that had not previously been apparent.

The vision that the apostle received on the road to Damascus began a ministry that made possible for him to receive a manifestation of his loving Heavenly Father in a most remarkable way. He wrote, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to

him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”—Rom. 11:33-36

As we trace the experiences of the great apostle, we cannot help but be impressed with the truthfulness of his words spoken to the heathen king. From the time that he received the vision until his sacrificial work was completed at Rome, Paul’s every talent was devoted to the work of glorifying God. This work led to suffering and privation. He experienced imprisonment, stripes, hunger, weariness, persecution, and finally death. However, he never wavered in his determination to be obedient to the heavenly vision and to the marvelous outworking of his invitation to serve his Heavenly Father.

VISIONS AND REVELATIONS

In whatever manner God chose to reveal his eternal purpose throughout the ages, it was always harmonious and revealed his glorious plan. It was centered in Christ Jesus, “Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began, But is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”—II Tim. 1:9,10

The Apostle Paul proclaimed, “It is not expedient for me doubtless to glory. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord. I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot

tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”—II Cor. 12:1-4

Let us never doubt the wonderful vision we have been given of the marvelous and infinite wisdom, love, justice, and power of our loving Heavenly Father. We are favored with a deeper insight of the glorious character of God that continues to speak to us through his Word of Truth, “that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”—I Pet. 2:9 ■