

Obedient to the Vision of Truth

*“Whereupon,
O king Agrippa,
I was not
disobedient unto
the heavenly
vision.”*

—Acts 26:19

THESE WORDS OF THE

Apostle Paul, addressed to King Herod Agrippa, constitute, in brief, the explanation of why he was before the king, answering to charges that had been made against him by the Jews. God had given Paul a vision of understanding, the significance of which to the apostle was that the remaining days of his life were to be spent in the service of Christ whom, previously, he had persecuted and whose followers he had put to death.

Before being favored with this understanding from God, Paul had been a student of the Old Testament Scriptures. He had been zealous of the faith of his fathers. He would have had clearly in mind the many incidents of the past in which God favored his ancient prophets with special visions which were calculated to change the entire course of their lives. Being thus acquainted with the manner in which God selects and authorizes his special servants to lay down their lives for him, Paul knew instantly when he was struck down on the Damascus road that God

was calling him to a great service. It was in response to this that he lifted up his heart and voice to the Lord, saying, “What wilt thou have me to do?”—Acts 9:6

A short time later, Paul understood from the words he received from Ananias that the Lord intended this vision to have more than a passing effect in his life. He knew its meaning went beyond merely refraining from further persecutions of those who followed Jesus of Nazareth. It revealed that not only was he wrong in persecuting these disciples of the Master, but also that he was being called to be a “chosen vessel,” to bear God’s “name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel.”—Acts 9:6-17

WHOM SHALL I SEND?

Paul was most likely well acquainted with Isaiah’s account of the vision with which God had favored him. This account is recorded in the sixth chapter of Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah tells us that, as this vision unfolded to him, he heard the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Isaiah understood this to be a personal question addressed to him, and he responded in the affirmative, saying, “Here am I; send me.” (vs. 8) Paul recognized that the vision the Lord had given him on the Damascus road contained an implication of the same question, and, in a similar spirit of devotion to God as that manifested by Isaiah, he responded, “Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?”

Although there is a prophetic application to the vision given to Isaiah, as indicated by John 12:41 and its surrounding context, our consideration of it here will be from Isaiah’s perspective at the time the vision was given. To Isaiah, the substance of the vision was that it presented to him a mental picture

of God's glory, in which, as the prophet says, "I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." (Isa. 6:1) We are not to suppose from this that Isaiah saw God literally, because the Scriptures explain that no man can see God and live. It was, as the prophet indicates, a vision descriptive of certain characteristics possessed by God. By various means God has similarly revealed himself to all those whom he has invited into his service. These revelations have not always come while the individual was in a trance, or in some other miraculous way. Nevertheless, by some method God has always made known his will and plan when calling those whom he desires to take into his confidence and use in his service.

In his vision, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, "high and lifted up." Those to whom God has truly revealed himself have always "seen" him in this manner. If any have special visions purported to be of God, if they do not reveal him as "high and lifted up," they are not truly from him. There is no Scripture in which God has revealed himself as a torment deity, nor has he ever shown himself as degraded or in retreat before the forces of evil. God's position has always been upon the throne, just as Isaiah observed, and those who have a correct understanding of him have been made to realize that he is a God whom they delight to worship and in whose service they are glad to spend their life.

"HIS TRAIN FILLED THE TEMPLE"

Not only did Isaiah see, in vision, the Lord high and lifted up, but he saw also that "his train filled the temple." The word "train" signifies clothing, or

robe, and seems to place particular emphasis on the glorious and holy character of God. Thus, the prophet saw that the Lord's holy presence and influence, and his honor and great glory, permeated and hallowed everything within the Temple. This, in turn, would impress upon Isaiah's mind the fact that if he were to become fully associated with this most glorious being, it could mean nothing else than that God and his divine will was to influence and dominate, from henceforth, his every thought and word and deed. There was to be no place for anything else in the prophet's life but God. If we are to be temples of the living God, the same must be true of us.—I Cor. 3:16,17

If there could be still any doubt in Isaiah's mind as to the position of God and his holiness as the Creator of heaven and earth, the proclamation of the seraphim would reassure him, and, at the same time, lay more heavily upon him the implications of what he was seeing and hearing. These seraphim proclaimed, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isa. 6:2,3) Although we cannot say with certainty what the seraphim were, their words, "Holy, holy, holy," indicate that the prophet saw them as representative of God's character attributes, all of which demonstrate his holiness. Isaiah knew that, at the time he saw this vision, the "whole earth" was far from being filled with these holy qualities which would reflect the glory of the Lord. This assertion of the seraphim, nevertheless, would assure him that the time was yet coming when this would be true, and that by responding to the call of service, he would be joining a cause destined to result in

certain and ultimate blessings for all mankind, to the glory of God.

Explaining further the progress of the vision, the prophet says that “the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke.” (Isa. 6:4) This may have indicated to Isaiah that a door of opportunity was opening for him to enter the divine service. Realizing that he was utterly unworthy of the opportunity that was thus being suggested to him, and in sorrow and regret he said, “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.”—vs. 5

It is important to note the two contrasting thoughts which Isaiah puts together in the foregoing words, “Woe is me! for I am undone,” and “mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” He knew this heavenly vision meant that he was being called into the divine service. However, at the same time, as he considered the holiness of the one he was called to serve, he was struck with the sense of his own sins and his lack of ability to enter upon such a sacred and exalted ministry. While he understood that he was being summoned to speak for God, yet he thought, and properly so, that 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.”

As the vision progresses, Isaiah soon discovers that the Lord knew about his unclean lips, and that in spite of this, he was calling him to service. The prophet then realized that God did not intend to use his lips while they were unclean, but rather, had made

provision whereby they could be cleansed. Hence it was that Isaiah says he saw one of the seraphim come unto him, “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.” What wondrous grace is here manifested! It reveals God’s ability to use those who are imperfect by making provision whereby they can serve him in spite of the handicap of Adamic sin.

Properly enough, God did not extend the actual call to service until he had first given Isaiah the assurance that, in responding, his service would be acceptable. It is at this point that the prophet hears the inquiry from the Lord, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Realizing that he was a man of unclean lips, Isaiah would have been presumptuous to have responded to this invitation had not the Lord previously made a provision whereby his lips could be made clean. Being thus assured, and devoted in heart to God, Isaiah’s response was immediate and without reservation: “Here am I; send me.”—vs. 8

GOD’S APPROVAL NOT MEASURED BY RESULTS

When Isaiah responded in the affirmative to God’s invitation, indicating his willingness to go and speak for him, he received instructions as follows: “Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. ... 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, And the LORD have removed men far away, and there be a great forsaking in the midst of the land.”—Isa. 6:9-12

From the human standpoint, this was not a very bright prospect for the prophet as he entered upon the divine service. Here the Lord was warning him that, in going forth in his service, he must not expect that a majority of the people would rally to the cause. He must expect, rather, that from the human viewpoint, his entire ministry may well seem to end in utter failure. However, God wanted Isaiah to know that he was to continue in this service even though meager results were visible. He wanted Isaiah to go and speak for him, irrespective of whether or not those who heard appreciated it. He wanted the prophet to sound forth his praises because he had seen his glory and could not refrain from proclaiming, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts." Isaiah understood the meaning of what was implied in the vision and was faithful to it.

PAUL'S OBEDIENT RESPONSE

Paul's vision came to him under different circumstances from those in which the Lord revealed himself to Isaiah. Nevertheless, in principle, the import of the vision was the same. In it, Paul received a glimpse of the divine character which previously had not been apparent to him. The vision to which Paul later said he was not disobedient, however, did not all come to him on the Damascus road. It began there, and continued throughout his Christian walk. It was the effect of this greater understanding which later caused the apostle to write, "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? ... For of

him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”—Rom. 11:33-36

Paul’s sense of his unworthiness to enter the divine service would be deeply impressed upon him by the details of the vision in which God called him to be an ambassador. In all good conscience, he had been persecuting the church of Christ. Being an ardent Jew, he would, of course, be enthusiastic about the promised Messiah, but now it was revealed to him that he was, in fact, opposing that purpose. In persecuting the followers of Christ, he had been persecuting Christ himself, the long-awaited Messiah. 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. What humility this would engender!

As we trace the experiences of the great Apostle Paul, we cannot help being impressed with the truthfulness of his words spoken to King Agrippa in which he explained that he had not been disobedient to the heavenly vision. From the time that he received the Lord’s vision on the Damascus road, until his sacrificial work was completed in Rome, Paul’s every talent was devoted to the work of glorifying God. This work led to suffering, privation, imprisonment, stripes, hunger, weariness, persecution and finally death, yet he never wavered in his determination to be obedient to the heavenly vision.—II Cor. 6:4-10; 11:23-31

THE VISION OF TRUTH

It is important to note that the “visions” which came to those such as Isaiah, Paul and others are not to be identified merely by the special miraculous circumstances which may have accompanied these experiences. Rather, the primary import in all of

these was the understanding of some portion of the divine character and plan which God desired to make known at certain times to his servants. It is interesting, yea, thrilling, to note in the Scriptures the accounts of the understanding which God provided to his people from the days of Abel down to Paul, John and others of the apostles. In addition, and of great significance to us, is the understanding of truth through the enlightenment of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit, with which the Lord has favored his people since Pentecost.

Abel was granted sufficient insight into the will of God to be able to exercise his faith by bringing a flesh and blood offering to the Creator. Enoch saw enough of the divine character and plan to enable him to prophesy that the Lord would eventually come to execute judgments in the earth. Enoch was faithful to this vision, the record being that he “pleased God.” Noah was given understanding, particularly concerning events then due. In the faithful carrying out of his part in the divine arrangement for that time, he cooperated with God in furnishing us valuable information pertaining to the prophetic signs of the time with which another world is now ending.—Heb. 11:4-7

Abraham was given insight in which he saw the divine purpose to bless all the families of the earth. How Abraham must have rejoiced in the knowledge of God’s character, which thus came to him in the revelation of such a far-reaching plan of blessing. God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, and continued thereafter to reveal to him many things in connection with his plan which was to be carried out through Israel as types and shadows of greater

things to come. How Moses must have rejoiced in the knowledge of God thus shown to him. These and many others were taken into the divine confidence and used to further record the heavenly purposes which, when understood, reveal the true character of our God.—vss. 8-34

When Jesus came, he was favored with understanding surpassing anything that had yet been experienced. Matthew 3:16 says, “The heavens were opened unto him.” To him the knowledge of the divine arrangements was opened wide and, because of this, he certainly must have seen, as none other had ever seen, the glory of God. This was the inspiration of the Master’s life. For the joy that was thereby set before him, he endured the cross and despised the shame, and is now set down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.—Heb. 12:2

All the apostles, together with Paul, were favored with an understanding of heavenly truths through the enlightening power of God’s Holy Spirit. This did not come to all of them in the same way, nor under the same circumstances. Nevertheless, they all saw the glory of God as it was revealed in the divine plan of salvation, and they were obedient to that vision.

HEAVENLY TRUTHS HARMONIOUS

The knowledge with which God has favored his faithful people throughout the ages has always been harmonious. It has always had to do, in one way or another, with revealing the one glorious and eternal purpose of God as it centers in Christ Jesus, our Lord. After the apostles died, discernment of the divine plan and purpose was measurably lost, particularly during the period of the Dark Ages. Only a very

limited few during this time held onto the truths given by Jesus and the apostles, and these few were compelled to flee into a wilderness condition where, providentially, they were nourished of God.—Rev. 12:6

Finally, in the present “harvest” period, which is at the end of the Gospel age, a glorious and resplendent vision of understanding has been made available to God’s people through the Scriptures. Truly, we have been given the blessed privilege of joining Isaiah and saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts.” Jesus had promised that when he returned, he would “gird himself” and come forth and serve his people “meat in due season.” In fulfillment of this promise, a “faithful and wise servant” was used to draw together from the Scriptures the doctrine and principles which constitute the foundation of our faith.—Matt. 24:45,46; Luke 12:37,42,43

In one sense, there is nothing new in the truths which have been revealed during this harvest period, because they are all based upon the testimony of the Scriptures. However, our present understanding is more glorious than any that has ever been given to God’s people previously, barring only that which was given to the Master when the heavens were opened to him. This should not surprise us, however, because in its entirety is included the significance and glory of all previous knowledge provided to God’s faithful servants.

Our present understanding of truth encompasses all that had been previously seen by Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. It affords the real understanding of what is meant by the statement that Jesus brought “life and immortality to light through the gospel.” (II Tim. 1:10) In it we see

the true significance of what was revealed to Paul when, in vision, he was “caught up to the third heaven.” (II Cor. 12:2-4) It enables us to comprehend the significance of that wondrous vision Peter, James and John were given when they were with the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration. (Matt. 17:1-9) It reveals the mystery, “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:27) In our symbolic spiritual vision we find the true meaning of that which was revealed to, and spoken by the mouth of all God’s holy prophets since the world began—namely, the glorious hope of the “restitution of all things,” now so near at hand.—Acts 3:20,21

The knowledge of God which we are blessed to have is one in which he has revealed his glorious character to us. Through it, we see that our Heavenly Father is a God of love. We observe also his marvelous and infinite wisdom. We see his true justice and righteousness, and how they work in harmony with his great love. Finally, we understand the necessity of divine power for the carrying out of God’s loving designs for the blessing of all the families of the earth. Indeed, our vision of truth harmonizes and expands upon all the insights that previously have been given to the people of God. Thus we can have full confidence in the Word of God, that everything spoken therein will not return unto him “void,” but will accomplish all his righteous purposes and prosper in them.—Isa. 55:11

ARE WE OBEDIENT TO THE VISION?

God has favored us with much spiritual understanding, revealing to us his glorious character in a way that most have not understood nor appreciated. Is that vision of truth continuing to speak to us, as

God revealed it to Isaiah and Paul? Is it still saying to us, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" If we still hear that question being re-echoed in our hearts, are we continuing to respond in the words of Isaiah, "Here am I; send me?" If the Gospel message of truth is continuing to mean this to us, are we taking advantage of the opportunities of service which divine providence is setting before us?

Isaiah did not ask how many converts he would make when he answered the call to service. Paul did not respond to the vision on condition that the Lord would bless his efforts with immediate and apparent results. Some results did attend the apostle's ministry, and he was blessed with the privilege of establishing ecclesias in various parts of the then civilized world. Yet, near the end of his life, Paul was mostly alone, and even realized the fact that some of those whom he had reached and loved and served had turned away from him and from the doctrine he had so faithfully taught. Our obedience to the heavenly vision must, likewise, be undertaken without consideration to the matter of whether or not our labor for the Lord will be rewarded with immediate fruitful results.

If we have properly understood God's Word of truth, it will have revealed to us the fact that we are members of a fallen and condemned race and, in the filthy rags of our own righteousness, we could not render acceptable service to God. At the same time, if our faith can grasp the full sense of divine grace that is revealed in the Scriptures, we will know that, through Christ, there is provided a "robe of righteousness" which covers our imperfections, and that in this robe we have a standing

before God, and the assurance that our imperfect works are acceptable to him.—Isa. 61:10

We will not, therefore, be deterred from responding to the vision with our whole hearts on the grounds that we are not good enough. Rather, we will thank God for the justification that is made possible through the blood of Jesus and, in faith, devote ourselves fully to making known the divine glories as they have been revealed to us. We will realize that henceforth we are to be wholly devoted to showing forth the praises of him who hath called us “out of darkness into his marvellous light.” (I Pet. 2:9) Our response, moreover, will not be in word only, but in deed and in truth. (I John 3:18) We will gladly obey at the cost of anything, whether it be sacrifice, toil, weariness, persecution, pain, or finally, death. Our attitude will not be, “Must I do this or that?” but, “May I sacrifice and be of service?”

Like Isaiah we, through the vision of truth, have seen the character of our Heavenly Father. We view him in his glory and beauty, “high and lifted up,” and we recognize the splendor of his Son, Christ Jesus. We can see their stately steppings, as together they march on to glorious victory in the establishment of the Messianic kingdom now so near at hand.

If we are to be accounted worthy of having the privilege of being participants with God and Christ in the glorious work of the kingdom, we must now continue our response to the heavenly vision in terms of full devotion to the Lord. Such a devotion will not permit us to stop short of surrendering all that we have to the divine service, and to the glory of the Lord. Thus, like Paul, may we be found obedient “unto the heavenly vision.” ■