

A LIVING WORD

By Rev. Will Nelken

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The descendants of Jacob, grandson of Abraham, have a long history of receiving communications from God. Beginning with God's appearances to Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and then His sudden appearance to Moses in a bush that burned without being consumed. For more than forty years, God spoke with Moses face-to-face, like a man speaks with a friend. The general population of the Israelites, however, were terrified to hear from God, so by God's decree Moses established a priesthood, which provided for indirect counsel through judges, priests, and prophets.

At times, however, godly wisdom was scarce.

1 Samuel 3:1

Meanwhile, the boy Samuel served the Lord by assisting Eli [(the High Priest)]. Now in those days messages from the Lord were very rare, and visions were quite uncommon.

Filling the Gap

To fill in the gap for themselves, God's people frequently resorted to other sources.

Of course, other religions of the region also offered their own style of prophets, claiming to represent the voice and wisdom of a god, which was generally in conflict with the God of the Hebrews. Sometimes, it culminated in a prophetic showdown.

1 Kings 18 (The Message)

¹⁷⁻¹⁹ *The moment Ahab saw Elijah he said, "So it's you, old troublemaker!"*

"It's not I who has caused trouble in Israel," said Elijah, "but you and your government—you've dumped God's ways and commands and run off after the local gods, the Baals. Here's what I want you to do: Assemble everyone in Israel at Mount Carmel. And make sure that the special pets of Jezebel, the four hundred and fifty prophets of the local gods, the Baals, and the four hundred prophets of the whore goddess Asherah, are there."

²⁰ *So Ahab summoned everyone in Israel, particularly the prophets, to Mount Carmel.*

²¹ *Elijah challenged the people: "How long are you going to sit on the fence? If God is the real God, follow him; if it's Baal, follow him. Make up your minds!"*

Nobody said a word; nobody made a move.

²²⁻²⁴ *Then Elijah said, "I'm the only prophet of God left in Israel; and there are 450 prophets of Baal. Let the Baal prophets bring up two oxen; let them pick one, butcher it, and lay it out on an altar on firewood—but don't ignite it. I'll take the other ox, cut it up, and lay it on the wood. But neither will I light the fire. Then you pray to your gods and I'll pray to God. The god who answers with fire will prove to be, in fact, God."*

All the people agreed: "A good plan—do it!"

²⁵ *Elijah told the Baal prophets, "Choose your ox and prepare it. You go first, you're the majority. Then pray to your god, but don't light the fire."*

²⁶ *So they took the ox he had given them, prepared it for the altar, then prayed to Baal. They prayed all morning long, "O Baal, answer us!" But nothing happened—not so much as a whisper of breeze. Desperate, they jumped and stomped on the altar they had made.*

²⁷⁻²⁸ *By noon, Elijah had started making fun of them, taunting, "Call a little louder—he is a god, after all. Maybe he's off meditating somewhere or other, or maybe he's gotten involved in a project, or maybe he's on vacation. You don't suppose he's overslept, do you, and needs to be waked up?"*

They prayed louder and louder, cutting themselves with swords and knives—a ritual common to them—until they were covered with blood.

²⁹ *This went on until well past noon. They used every religious trick and strategy they knew to make something happen on the altar, but nothing happened—not so much as a whisper, not a flicker of response.*

^{30–35} *Then Elijah told the people, “Enough of that—it’s my turn. Gather around.” And they gathered. He then put the altar back together for by now it was in ruins. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes of Jacob, the same Jacob to whom God had said, “From now on your name is Israel.” He built the stones into the altar in honor of God. Then Elijah dug a fairly wide trench around the altar. He laid firewood on the altar, cut up the ox, put it on the wood, and said, “Fill four buckets with water and drench both the ox and the firewood.” Then he said, “Do it again,” and they did it. Then he said, “Do it a third time,” and they did it a third time. The altar was drenched and the trench was filled with water.*

^{36–37} *When it was time for the sacrifice to be offered, Elijah the prophet came up and prayed, “O God, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, make it known right now that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I’m doing what I’m doing under your orders. Answer me, God; O answer me and reveal to this people that you are God, the true God, and that you are giving these people another chance at repentance.”*

³⁸ *Immediately the fire of God fell and burned up the offering, the wood, the stones, the dirt, and even the water in the trench.*

³⁹ *All the people saw it happen and fell on their faces in awed worship, exclaiming, “God is the true God! God is the true God!”*

Yet, even such miraculous encounters could not effect a lasting conversion. Undisciplined and impetuous, God’s people grew unstable if there seemed to be any delay on God’s part, and soon turned to other means of divination — spiritists, horoscopes, fortunetellers, or good old self-will.

Jehoshaphat, one of Judah’s kings was reluctant to take advice from such soothsayers. One time, when he and the king of Israel were planning to recover land from the Arameans, *“Jehoshaphat said to the king of Israel, ‘Please inquire first for the word of the Lord.’ ”* Instead, Israel’s king assembled his court prognosticators, who with one voice assured them of an easy victory. Uncertain of their wisdom, Jehoshaphat pressed, *“Is there not yet a prophet of the Lord here that we may inquire of him?”* (1 Kings 22:3-7)

On another occasion, pursuing another enemy with the kings of Israel and Edom, their armies became hopelessly lost in the wilderness of Moab. Then Jehoshaphat said, *“Is there not a prophet of the Lord here, that we may inquire of the Lord by him?”* And one of the king of Israel’s servants answered and said, *“Elisha the son of Shaphat is here, who used to pour water on the hands of Elijah.”* Jehoshaphat said, *“The word of the Lord is with him.”* So the three kings went down to speak with him. (2 Kings 3:9-12)

“Is there not a prophet of the Lord here?” Isn’t there one who recognizes His voice and will speak for Him?

Scarcely a Word

As time moved on, true prophets became scarce. The psalmist lamented: *“We no longer see your miraculous signs. All the prophets are gone, and no one can tell us when it will end.”* (Psalm 74:9)

Amos actually delivered a prophecy about this very condition: *“The time is surely coming,” says the Sovereign Lord, “when I will send a famine on the land—not a famine of bread or water but of hearing the words of the Lord. People will stagger from sea to sea and wander from border to border searching for the word of the Lord, but they will not find it. Beautiful girls and strong young men will grow*

faint in that day, thirsting for the Lord's word. And those who swear by the shameful idols of Samaria—who take oaths in the name of the god of Dan and make vows in the name of the god of Beersheba—they will all fall down, never to rise again.” (Amos 8:11-14)

And so it came to pass... The period of four centuries between Malachi (the last Old Testament prophet) and the appearance of Jesus was known as the “silent period,” when there was no fresh revelation from God. All was silent on the heavenly front. Four hundred years of famine for a word from God. God's people staggered, sought fruitlessly, thirsted, fainted, and fell down.

End of the Drought

What a relief, what a refreshing when Jesus appeared! Like an oasis in the desert, His words were fresh and authoritative, not cliché or canned. His works demonstrated liberating power, not restrictive pressure. Here is how the writer to the Hebrews recalled it:

Hebrews 1

¹ In the long ago past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets, in fragmentary portions and by many different methods, ² but in these last days He has spoken to us directly through His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He created the universe.

The Living Word

Apostle John reflected on his own encounter with Jesus, whom he called “the Word”:

John 1

¹ In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He existed in the beginning with God. ³ God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him.

⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

¹⁰ He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. ¹¹ He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. ¹² But to all who believed him and [received] him, he gave the right to become children of God. ¹³ They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.

¹⁴ So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.

“The Word was God... and the Word became human.”

For a time, the Living Word of God lived among us. He taught and explained and revealed the Kingdom of God. Then He died, in order to make that Kingdom accessible to all. He rose from the dead to give us the keys to the Kingdom. Then, prepared to return to the presence of the Father, the Man, Christ Jesus, said:

John 16:7

“I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you.”

This Helper, the Holy Spirit, has come to live in the heart of every person who has pledged to follow Jesus Christ, as the down payment of all that God has promised to those who trust Him. The Spirit of God is not just “around” you or “with” you; now He is “in you.”

He has come to you, Jesus said, to *“teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.”* (John 14:26) And, *“He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak.”* (John 16:13) The Spirit of God reveals the words of God to us. More than that, He reveals the message of God *in us*, so that we, too, become living words...

You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:2-3; RSV)

The Word is still becoming human, to reveal God’s wisdom and grace to the world. This transformation is a process, which we may resist or embrace.

In order to become “a word from God” we must first eat many words from God for ourselves. As you have heard before, “you are what you eat.”

Our minds must be renewed so that we can recognize God’s thoughts, and reason using God’s logic. For this renewal to take place, we must pursue a thorough acquaintance with God’s written word, the Bible.

The Life-Giving Word

Devoutly written by 40 different authors in three different languages over a period of 1500 years, and laboriously and painstakingly copied and preserved from generation to generation, the Holy Bible is the best documented work of ancient literature on the planet. There is not even a close second!

In spite of the variety of its authorship, across cultures and time, it demonstrates a single central theme from Genesis to the Revelation: the redeeming, sacrificial love of God for His creation, transacted by His glorious Son.

This amazing book is the Owner’s Manual for human life and society.

But as A.W. Tozer said, “The Bible will never be a living Book to us until we are convinced that God is articulate in His universe. To jump from a dead, impersonal world to a dogmatic Bible is too much for most people. ...I believe that much of our religious unbelief is due to a wrong conception of and a wrong feeling for the Scriptures. (Such as...)”

“A silent God suddenly began to speak in a book and when the book was finished lapsed back into silence again forever. Now we read the book as the record of what God said when He was for a brief time in a speaking mood.

“With notions like that in our heads how can we believe? The facts are that God is not silent, has never been silent. It is the nature of God to speak. The second Person of the Holy Trinity is called the *Word*. The Bible is the inevitable outcome of God's continuous speech. It is the infallible declaration of His mind for us put into our familiar human words. I think a new world will arise out of the religious mists when we approach our Bible with the idea that it is not only a book which was once spoken, but a book which is *now speaking*.”

The Bible is not just a book of facts or stories or precepts. It is the vehicle through which God communicates with His children today. It is not *what* you know from the Bible, but *Who* you know.

Jesus scolded the Jewish leaders, saying, “*You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to me! Yet you refuse to come to me to receive this life.*” (John 5:39-40)

The Bible paints a picture of Jesus for us in words. The picture is not the person, it is only a snapshot, a glimpse, that may, if we look closely at it, help us recognize the real person when we see Him and prevent us from mistaking another person for Him. So, the Bible may help us recognize the Spirit of Jesus and keep us from following another spirit.

C.S. Lewis wrote, “It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit, and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to Him.”

The Word Alive

The greatest need of our day — both for the individual and for the global society — is not health reform or economic reform or a new world order; it is the restoration of a living, life-giving word from God through Jesus Christ.

Our society (and every other society) is desperate for the dynamic application of God’s Word to our conditions, our ecology, our relationships, our economy, our technology, our culture, and our government.

We do not need the tired, worn out clichés of religious legalism and dead dogma that stifle and kill, but we need the refreshing revelation of the heart of our Redeemer that dignifies and liberates.

How can we hear a such living word from God today?

Tozer wrote, “God’s word in the Bible can have power only because it corresponds to God’s Word in the universe. It is the present Voice (of the Holy Spirit) which makes the written word powerful. Otherwise it would lie locked in slumber within the covers of a book.”

Apostle Paul wrote, “*Faith comes by hearing a word about Christ.*” (Romans 10:17) If we don’t regularly hear a word from the Lord, and receive a fresh awareness of who Jesus is and what He wants from us, our faith will wither away. We’ll still have our religion, but the dynamic of real faith will have vanished.

A Lamp for Our Feet

I’m looking for people here who will *covenant with God* to read through the Bible through — once each year (3.25 chapters daily) or twice each year (6.5 chapters daily) or thrice each year (9.75 chapters daily) each year — not because it’s a church program or challenge, but because it is the source of all knowledge of Jesus Christ and it is the source of a full and significant life.

If you want to bring your thought life or speech under control, commit to read the Word.

If you want to change your habits and desires, commit to read the Word.

If you want your relationships to improve, commit to read the Word.

Can it really accomplish all that? Yes! And so much more.

This Book contains the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners and the happiness of believers. Its doctrines are holy, its precepts are binding, its histories are true, and

its decisions are immutable. Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe and practice it to be holy. It contains light to direct you, food to support you and comfort to cheer you. It is the traveler's map, the pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass, the soldier's sword and the Christian's charter. Here paradise is restored, heaven opened and the gates of hell disclosed. Christ is its grand object, our good is its design and the glory of God its end. It should fill your memory, rule your heart, and guide your feet. Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully. It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory, and a river of pleasure. It is given you in life, will be opened in the judgment, and will be remembered forever. It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor, and will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

In the Preface to the Great Bible, 1540, Thomas Cranmer wrote, "But still you will say, 'I cannot understand it.' Why am I not surprised? How will you understand it if you will not read, nor look upon it? Take the Book in your hands, read the whole story, and what you understand retain in your memory; what you do not yet understand, read again and again. If that does not enlighten you, counsel with someone who has learned more than you. Go to your pastor; show that you really want to know and learn, and I do not doubt that God — seeing your diligence and readiness — even if no one else will teach you, will Himself illuminate your mind by His Holy Spirit, and open for you what was previously locked."

A textbook called, *The New Testament Speaks*, offers this sage advice: "One does not hear God's word of grace in the Scriptures unless he has decided that this is the word he really needs and wants to hear. He must decide that as he hears he is prepared to submit to the voice of God, to be judged by it and to have it challenge all that he knows and intends. He must understand that what he hears the Bible say can change his very life. Therefore, he cannot come to the [Bible] as the disputer, the wise man, the judge over the word of God. He can come only as the child who needs to be made wise by the Wisdom of God (I Cor. 1:18-31)."

Read It Thoroughly

R.C. Sproul says, "We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy."

A man was looking for some guidance from God so he asked God to make his Bible open at the page He wanted him to read. So the man opened his Bible randomly and the first verse that his eyes met was 2 Corinthians 13:12, "Greet one another with a holy kiss." A bit confused, he tried again and this time he found himself at 1 Corinthians 14:39 "Do not forbid the use of tongues." He made another attempt the next day, and the first verse he found was Matthew 27:5, "he went and hanged himself." To his chagrin the next verse he turned to was Luke 10:37, "... go and do likewise!"

Not a good approach!

"The Bible is a corridor between two eternities down which walks the Christ of God; His invisible steps echo through the Old Testament, but we meet Him face to face in the throne room of the New; and it is through that Christ alone, crucified for me, that I have found forgiveness for sins and life eternal. The Old Testament is summed up in the word *Christ*; the New Testament is summed up in the word *Jesus*; and the summary of the whole Bible is that *Jesus is the Christ*." (Bishop Pollock)

I'll close with a poem that expresses the high value of reading the Bible thoroughly. May it become your theme, too.

When I Read the Bible Through

by Amos R. Wells

I supposed I knew my Bible
Reading piecemeal, hit and miss,
Now a bit of John or Matthew,
Now a snatch of Genesis,
Certain chapters of Isaiah
Certain Psalms (the twenty-third);
Twelfth of Romans, First of Proverbs
Yes, I thought I knew the Word;
But I found that thorough reading
Was a different thing to do,
And the way was unfamiliar
When I read the Bible through.

Oh, the massive, mighty volume!
Oh, the treasures manifold!
Oh, the beauty of the wisdom
And the grace it proved to hold!
As the story of the Hebrews
Swept in majesty along,
As it leaped in waves prophetic,
As it burst to sacred song,
As it gleamed with Christly omens,
The Old Testament was new,
Strong with cumulative power,
When I read the Bible through.

Ah! Imperial Jeremiah,
With his keen, brilliant mind;
And the blunt old Nehemiah,
And Ezekiel refined!
Newly came the song idyllic,
And the tragedy of Job;
Deuteronomy, the regal,
To a towering mountain grew,
With its comrade peaks around it
When I read the Bible through.

What a radiant procession
As the pages rise and fall,
James the sturdy, John the tender
Oh, the myriad-minded Paul!
Vast apocalyptic glories
Wheel and thunder, flash and flame,
While the church triumphant raises
One incomparable name.
Ah, the story of the Savior
Never glows supremely true
Till you read it whole and swiftly,
Till you read the Bible through.

You who like to play at Bible,
Dip and dabble, here and there,
Just before you kneel, weary,
And yawn thro' a hurried prayer;
You who treat the Crown of Writings
As you treat no other book
Just a paragraph disjointed,
Just a crude, impatient look
Try a worthier procedure,
Try a broad and steady view;
You will kneel in very rapture
When you read the Bible through.