

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION Chapter 14

GOD'S SUBJECTIVE REVELATION IN THE SOUL

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Transcript

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Chapter 14

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IN THE SOUL

We would be woefully unfaithful to our calling and fail lamentably in the exercise of our present task did we not here issue a plain and solemn warning—one which we beg each reader, and especially the young preacher to seriously take to heart, namely that something more than an intellectual belief in the existence of God and the inspiration of His Word is necessary to the soul's recovery. There are multitudes now in Hell who lived and died in the firm belief that God is and that the Bible is a communication from Himself unto the children of men. It is one thing for the mind to be assured that creation must have a Divine Creator, and quite another for the heart to be yielded up to Him. There is a radical difference between mental assent to the evidences of God's existence, and a wholehearted consent to take Him as my God—my only Lord, my chief Good, my supreme End—subject to Him, delighting in Him, seeking His glory. So too with His Word. It is one thing to be thoroughly persuaded of the uniqueness and excellence of its contents, yet it is quite another to submit to its authority and be regulated by its precepts. One may greatly admire the plan of redemption revealed therein, and yet have no acquaintance with its saving power! The evidence we have presented for the existence of God and the arguments produced in demonstration of the Divine Authorship of the Bible, are amply sufficient for that purpose, yet they are incapable of regenerating a single person or of producing saving faith in anyone. Though they be such as no Infidel can refute, though they thoroughly expose the utter irrationality of skepticism—they will not be effectual in bringing one soul from spiritual death unto spiritual life. They are indeed sufficient to intellectually convince anyone who will impartially weigh the same, but they are unable to accomplish a spiritual transformation in the soul. Though they are strong enough to produce an historical faith, they are not strong enough to work saving faith. Something more is necessary for that. However desirable and valuable be a mental assent to the Bible's being the Word of God, we must not rest satisfied therewith. There is a vital difference between perceiving the transcendence of its teaching, its immeasurable

superiority to all the writings of men, and having a personal experience in our own soul of its sanctifying virtue. That can be acquired by no study or pains on our part, nor can it be imparted by the ablest reasoner or most searching preacher. In the introductory chapter we stated that after treating of the manifestations which God has made of Himself in creation, in the moral nature of man, in His shaping of human history, in His incarnate Son and in the sacred Scriptures, we would consider that saving revelation which He makes of Himself in the souls of His people. In each of the others, it was an objective revelation of God which engaged our attention; but we now concern ourselves with a subjective or inward revelation of Himself. This is a much more difficult branch of our subject, and one which requires to be handled with great care and reverence; yet it is the most vital of all so far as the eternal interests of the soul are concerned, and therefore one which it behooves each of us to give our best attention unto. There are few duties to which professing Christians are so reluctant to apply themselves—they would not think of crossing a river in a boat with an insecure and leaky bottom, and yet will venture into the ocean of eternity on an untested (and, most probably, unsound) faith. All around us are those who mistake a theoretical knowledge of the Gospel for a saving acquaintance therewith. There is a vast difference between being firmly persuaded that God is, and knowing God for myself, so as to have access to Him, communion with Him, delight in Him. Such a knowledge of Him cannot be obtained by any efforts on our part. It is impossible for a man by any exercise of his rational and reasoning powers—by acquired knowledge in the arts and sciences, by philosophy or astronomy—to attain to the least spiritual knowledge of God. The existence of God may be known, His works seen and admired, His Word read and stored up in the mind, and yet without any true and saving knowledge of the Triune Jehovah. No human study or learning can impart to us one spiritual idea of God and His Christ, or convey the slightest acquaintance with Him. The reader of these lines may acknowledge God, confess Him to be sovereign, holy, just and good, and yet be entirely ignorant of Him to any good purpose. An infinite Being cannot be cognized by finite reason. "Canst thou by searching find out God?" (Job 11:7). We may indeed say of His wondrous works, "Lo these are parts of His ways," yet after the most exhaustive investigation and examination of them we are obliged to add, "but how little a portion is heard of Him" (Job 26:14). God can only be known as He is supernaturally revealed to the heart by the Spirit through the Word. None can be brought to a spiritual and saving knowledge of God apart from Divine illumination and communication. Hear what Christ Himself declared on the subject: "neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomever the Son will reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). They may entertain correct opinions of Him, have Scriptural ideas of Him in their brains, but know Him they do not and cannot, unless Christ, by His Spirit, make Him manifest to the soul. To the Jews He averred, "It is My Father that honoureth Me: of whom ye say that He is your God Yet ye have not known Him" (John 8:54, 55). So it is today, with the vast majority of preachers and professing Christians: they mistake a notional knowledge of God for an experiential acquaintance with Him. The Lord Jesus said, "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes" (Matthew 11:25). "Unto babes,"—unto those whom Divine grace has made simple and teachable, little in their own eyes, conscious of their ignorance, and who cling to Him in their dependence. When Peter owned the Saviour as, "The Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus answered, "Blessed art thou Simon Bar-jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in Heaven" (Matt. 16:17). Peter had long been in possession of the Old Testament, yet despite its prophecies so manifestly fulfilled in and by the Lord Jesus, it was not sufficient of itself to produce in Peter a saving conviction that Jesus was the Messiah. Nor were His wondrous miracles enough to bring spiritual assurance to Peter's heart—they did not even to the multitudes who witnessed them! Nor is the Word of God, even in its unadulterated purity, adequate of itself to save souls. This too was unmistakably and solemnly demonstrated by the preaching of Christ: the great majority of those who

listened to Him remained unaffected, or else had their native enmity against Him fanned into a flame. Nothing external to man can impart to him a saving knowledge of God or His Christ. There must be a supernatural application of the Truth made unto the heart by the special power of God before it can be spiritually apprehended. Not without good reason did the most favored of the Old Testament Prophets exclaim, "Who hath believed our report? And to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?" (Isa. 53:1)—the second question answering the former. That evangelical Prophet, like most of God's servants in all ages, had many Gospel hearers, but few in whose hearts a supernatural work of Divine grace was wrought. The "arm of the LORD" is a figurative expression for His invincible power (Ps. 136:12). The Lord, in His conquering might, is revealed subjectively by inward manifestation, with life and efficacy in the soul. In 1 Corinthians 2:4, the same expression is termed, "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Where there is not that powerful work of the Spirit in the heart, there is no genuine conversion. In order to do that, something more than faithful preaching is necessary: there must be a distinct, personal, peculiar, immediate, miraculous and effectual work of the Spirit: "a certain woman named Lydia... whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto [took unto her] the things which were spoken of Paul" (Acts 16:14). "You may listen to the preacher, God's own Truth be clearly shown: But you need a greater Teacher From the everlasting Throne. Application is the work of God alone."

The most fearful and fatal delusion now so prevalent in most sections of so-called "evangelical" Christendom is that a saving belief in Christ lies within the power of the natural man, that by performing what is naively termed "a simple act of faith," he becomes a new creature. That is to make the sinner the beginner of his own salvation! He takes "the first step," and God does the rest; he believes, and then God renews him—which is a blatant denial of the imperative necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit. The fact is, if there is one time more than another when a man is absolutely dependent upon the Spirit's power, it is at the beginning, for the most formidable difficulty lies there. To savingly believe in Christ is a supernatural act and is the direct product of a supernatural work of grace in the soul. Fallen and depraved man has no more power to come to Christ evangelically than he has merit of his own to entitle him to God's favour. He is as completely dependent on the Spirit's gracious operation within him as he is upon Christ's worthiness without him. Fallen man is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), and a dead soul cannot "co-operate," any more than a physical corpse can with an undertaker. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor. 2:14). The "things Of the Spirit" signify contents of the Word of Truth, for they were penned under His immediate inspiration. The "natural man" is man in his fallen and unrenewed state while the sinner remains unregenerate, he "receiveth not" either the Divine Law or the Gospel. That requires a word of explication: the natural man can, and often does, receive the things of the Spirit in the letter of them as so many propositions or statements, but he cannot apprehend them as does one who has been made the subject of a miracle of grace. They are "foolishness"—absurd, unattractive, distasteful to him. Yea, he "cannot know them"—he is disqualified to perceive their verity and value; "because they are spiritually discerned," and spiritual discernment he has none. The sinner has to be transformed from a natural into a spiritual man before he has any spiritual perception. "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). Only in God's light can we see light (Ps. 36:9), and in order to do that, we must be brought out of that darkness in which sin has enveloped the soul. The natural man, by reading and hearing, is competent to receive the things of God in their grammatical sense and to acquire an accurate mental notion of them, but is quite incapable of receiving a spiritual image of them in his understanding, of taking them into his affections, of cordially accepting them with his will. They are neither discerned by him in their Divine majesty and glory, delighted in by him, nor obeyed. The things of the Spirit are not only addressed to the intellect as true, but to the conscience as obligatory, to the affections as

good and lovely, to the will to be yielded unto. The unregenerate are entirely unable to recognize by an inward experience their surpassing weight and worth. They may indeed receive the Truth of God into their brains, but they never receive "the love of the Truth" (2 Thess. 2:10) in their affections. The natural man is insensible alike to the authority and the excellence of the things of the Spirit of God, because his whole inward state is antagonistic to them. There must be congeniality between the perceiver and the thing perceived: only the pure in heart can see God. We not only need the Spirit objectively to reveal unto us the things of God, but He must make us subjectively spiritual men before we can receive them into our hearts. As the eye is fashioned to take in sights, and the ear, sounds—as the faculties of the mind are fitted to think, reason, and retain concepts, so God must make the heart of fallen man suitable unto spiritual things ere he can receive them. There must be a correspondence between the object apprehended and the subject apprehending, as there is between the qualities of matter and the senses of the body which cognize them. As I cannot truly appreciate in oratorio—no matter how acute my hearing—unless I have a musical ear and refined taste, neither can I delight in spiritual things until I be made spiritual. Between God and fallen man there is no living relation, no agreement. The "beauty of holiness" cannot be perceived by one who is in love with and blinded by sin. There is no harmony between the sinner's spirit and the Holy Spirit. No matter how simply and clearly the things of God be set before the natural man, nor how logically and accurately he may reason about them, he cannot receive them in their actuality and spirituality, for he has no spiritual sight to discern their wisdom and goodness, no taste to relish their loveliness and sweetness, no capacity to take in their desirability and glory. "The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). Though "the Light of the world" stood before them, they saw in Him no beauty that they should desire Him. Something more than an external revelation of Him is necessary, even such as that described in: "For God who [in the beginning] commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). The unregenerate have their "understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart" (Eph. 4:18), and they have no more ability or power of their own to dispel the same than had the deep to dissipate the darkness which abode upon it (Gen. 1:2). In the darkness of a heart which, in its native condition, is a chamber of spiritual death, God shines with a light that is none other than Himself. The One who is light irradiates the benighted soul, and in His light it now sees the fullness of truth and grace shining in the face of Jesus Christ. By sovereign fiat and miraculous power the soul is now enabled to discern the glory of the Divine perfections manifested in and through the Redeemer. For several generations past there has been a woeful ignoring of what has been pointed out above. There has been little recognition of the fact, and still less acknowledgment of it, that all which the Father has purposed and contrived, all that the Son has done and suffered for the redemption of His people, is unavailable and ineffective to their souls until the Holy Spirit applies the same. The inestimable blessings of the Father's love, through the Son's mediation, are only brought home to the souls of the elect by the testimony, power and operations of the Spirit. But during the last century, the majority of "evangelists" displayed a zeal which was not according to knowledge. In their efforts to show the simplicity of "the way of salvation," they ignored the difficulties of salvation (Luke 18:24; 1 Pet. 4:18); and in their pressing the responsibility of men to believe, repudiated the fact that none can do so savingly until the Spirit imparts faith. One of His titles is "the Spirit of faith" (2 Cor. 4:13), because He is the Author and Communicator of it. Faith is "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8): not offered for man's acceptance, but actually bestowed: "the faith of the operation [not of man's will, but] of God" (Col. 2:12)—"who by Him do believe in God" (1 Pet. 1:21). The work of the Spirit in the heart is as indispensable as was the work of Christ on the Cross. The necessity for the Spirit's inward and effective operations are from the darkness, depravity and spiritual emptiness of fallen human nature. He alone can discover to us

our dire need of Christ, convict us of our lost and ruined condition, create within us a hatred and horror of sin, bring us to consent to Christ's sceptre, and make us willing in the day of His power to take Christ's yoke upon us. By nature we are totally averse to holiness, and from birth have been accustomed to doing evil only. It is impossible for us to take into the arms of our affection a holy Christ until the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus first takes hold of us. Moreover, there is a transcendency in spiritual things which far exceeds the highest flight of natural reason. Nature stands in need of grace in order for the heart to be rightly disposed to receive the things of God, and no human culture or education can effect that. A Gospel which comes to us from Heaven can only be savingly known by an inward revelation from Heaven. The Gospel is a revelation of Divine grace, such as had never entered the heart of man to conceive, still less is it capable of comprehending it—their Author must apply it to the heart. The Gospel consists of supernatural truth and it can only be perceived in a supernatural light. True, an unregenerate person may acquire a theoretical concept and notional knowledge of the Gospel, but that is a radically different thing from a spiritual and experimental knowledge thereof: the latter is possible only by the effectual application of the Spirit. The natural man lacks both will and power to turn unto Christ. Do some of our readers regard that as "dangerous teaching"? Then we would remind them of the words of the Lord Jesus, "No man can come to Me, except the Father who hath sent Me draw him" (John 6:44). We who are "darkness" by nature must be made "light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8) ere we can enjoy the light of the Lord. As we cannot see the sun in the heavens but in its own light, neither can we see the Sun of righteousness but by the beams of His sacred illumination. "When it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1:15, 16). There Paul gives us an account of his conversion, ascribing it wholly unto God: unto His foreordination, His effectual call, His miraculous and inward illumination by the Spirit. The Holy Scriptures, which are inspired of God, contain a clear and full revelation of His will concerning our faith and practice. They are able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus, and having done so, by them the man of God is "thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:15-17). Great things are ascribed to those Scriptures and the most blessed effects are declared to be produced by them. "The Law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Ps. 19:7, 8). In all ages the child of God has acknowledged, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105). All of the Christian's peace and joy, assurance and expectation, proceeds from the knowledge which he has of the love and grace of God as declared in His Word. Nevertheless, it remains that the operations of the Holy Spirit within our souls are imperative and indispensable: the Gospel needs to come to us—not only at first, but throughout our Christian lives—"not in word only, but in power, and in the Holy Spirit" (1 Thess. 1:5). Our reception of the Truth is due alone to the interposition and secret workings of an Almighty power in our hearts, making it effectual to our conviction, conversion and consolation.

Source:

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