

The Bible and Religious Experience

by Samuel Logan Brengle

God reveals Himself to man through nature, the Bible, and spiritual experiences, and we must be careful how we deal with seekers to effectively minister to them.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:21, Hebrews 1:1

Topics: "The Power of Scripture", "Divine Revelation"

Description

Samuel Logan Brengle emphasizes that God reveals Himself to humanity rather than the other way around, showcasing His power and love through nature, conscience, and ultimately through the Scriptures. He argues that while nature provides a glimpse of God's majesty, it is through the Bible that we find a complete and clear revelation of His character and will. Brengle highlights the necessity of spiritual openness and faith to truly understand and experience the Scriptures, as they are vital for a fulfilling Christian life. He also addresses the importance of compassionate ministry to those struggling with faith, urging believers to guide seekers towards a deeper understanding of God's promises. The sermon concludes with a call to embrace the Bible as the ultimate source of divine truth and inspiration.

Transcript

I

Man does not discover God. God reveals Himself to man. God seeks men before men seek God. God reveals His wisdom and power through nature. He reveals His Holiness through conscience. He reveals His hatred of sin through His judgments. He reveals His redeeming love through faith. We see the power of God in the starry heavens, the storm-swept sea, the flooding, rushing river, the lofty mountains, the flaming volcano, the devastating tornado, the silent forces resistlessly lifting mighty forests from tiny seeds, and holding them aloft in columnar strength and beauty against wind and storm from century to century.

We see the wisdom of God in the marvelous adaptations of nature; the adaptation of the eye to light and color, of the ear to sound, of the nose to odors, of the tongue to flavors, of the skin to heat and cold, of the thumb and fingers set ever so aptly against each other, of the organs of digestion, of peristaltic and cardiac action, of plant and animal, of man and woman, of mother and child.

We see the redeeming love of God in Christ, in His works of pity and mercy, but most clearly in His atoning death on the cross.

But all this manifold unveiling and revelation of Himself God sums up in His Word. He declares Himself in the Scriptures, and therein we see Him as though reflected in a perfect mirror.

'The Lord revealed Himself to Samuel in Shiloh by the Word of the Lord,' we read (1 Samuel iii. 21). He declares His power, His wisdom and knowledge, His Holiness and righteousness, His mercy and everlasting love, His redeeming purpose and plan, in His Word. And this Word is vitally related to all satisfying and assured Christian experience. It floods the Christian with light. It reveals to him God's benevolent and passionately active interest in him; the way and spirit in which to seek God, and the condition of pardon, of purity, and of power. And when he has met these conditions, the Holy Spirit applies the words of Scripture to his heart with life-giving energy, so that that text in Proverbs is fulfilled in his experience: 'When thou goest, it shall lead thee; when thou sleepest, it shall keep thee; and when thou awakest, it shall talk with thee' (Proverbs vi. 22).

Nature only partially reveals God, and the wisest of men stumble and falter in trying to interpret God through nature; but in the Word of God we find Him fully and plainly revealed to the obedient and trusting soul.

But even the Scriptures fail to reveal God in all His beauty unless with penitence and faith men have drawn nigh to Him and been born from above and sanctified by the incoming of the Holy Spirit. The Book is in large measure sealed to unspiritual men. When Jesus prayed: 'Father, glorify Thy name,' we read that a Voice came from Heaven, saying, 'I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again,' and men interpreted the Voice according to their spiritual condition and relationship. 'The people that stood by and heard it said that it thundered' -- a material interpretation, to them it had no spiritual significance.

Others said, 'An angel spake unto Him' -- a spiritualistic interpretation. Only Jesus heard the voice of the everlasting Father. 'This Voice came not because of Me, but for your sakes,' said He.

I only knew He spake my name.

Where one heard thunder and one saw flame,

One man will read the Old Testament and see nothing but myths, scraps of legendary history, folk lore, a record of dreams, bits of biography, exaggerated stories of fights, battles, and wars of semi-savage tribes, and songs of a people slowly emerging from barbarism into civilization.

Another will read it and discover God down among His wayward creatures in their racial childhood revealing Himself to them in dreams, visions, judgments, deliverances, special providence, and by His Word through His prophets, as they were able to bear The Great Unveiling, until at last the final and full revelation came in Christ.

'God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son ' (Hebrews i. 1, 2).

Well may we pray David's prayer (I have prayed it a thousand times), 'Open Thou mine eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law.' And well may we covet the experience of the disciples: 'Then opened He the eyes of their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures' (Luke xxiv. 45).

It was this that happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. His spiritual eyes were opened. He saw God in Christ; and the old Scriptures with which he was so familiar took on new meaning, so that he said,

'Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope' (Romans xv. 4). When he read the story of the wanderings of his people in the wilderness on their way from Egypt to the land of promise, and how they were overthrown and perished in the wilderness, he recognized God's displeasure and saw a warning example: 'Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. . . . They are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come' (1 Corinthians x. 6, 11). And to Timothy he wrote: 'All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine (teaching), for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Timothy iii. 16, 17).

It was this that happened to Martin Luther as on his knees he painfully climbed the stairway in St. Peter's, Rome, when the still small voice sounded in his soul: 'Now the just shall live by faith.' Scales dropped from the eyes of his soul, God's kindly purpose and way of Salvation by faith was seen, and the Scriptures flamed with new and spiritual meaning, and became the passionate study of his remaining years.

It was this that happened to Augustine, the brilliant young rhetorician and libertine of Carthage, as deeply convicted of sin and spiritual impotence, he walked in his garden. He heard a voice in his inner ear, saying, 'Take and read,' and taking up Paul's Epistle to the Romans he read: 'The night is far spent, the day is at hand let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day: not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof.' Instantly his inner being flamed with spiritual light. The chains of his fleshly lusts and evil habits fell off, the dungeon doors of his soul flew open, and he walked out into the broad day of God's deliverance and Salvation, and the Scriptures henceforth were 'the man of his counsel.'

The Word of the Lord to man came in searching experiences and travailings of spirit as God drew nigh to men and revealed His will, His name, and nature to them. It 'came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,' writes Peter; and he assures us that it is 'a more sure word of prophecy: whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts ' (2 Peter i. 19-21).

Ezekiel says: 'The word of the Lord came unto me.'

'The word of the Lord came unto me,' wrote Jeremiah.

'Now the Lord had said unto Abraham' (Genesis xii. 1).

'The Lord hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee' (Jeremiah xxxi. 3).

There has been much questioning and debate about the nature and extent of Biblical inspiration.

Some Bible lovers maintain that every word was given by inspiration, while others have argued that the writers chose their own words in which to express the thoughts and revelations welling up within them.

But a thoughtful study seems to plainly show that some of the words were given while others were chosen by the writers.

Paul was troubled with a thorn in the flesh, and three times prayed for deliverance from it. Then Jesus spoke to him, and Paul gives us His very words, which translated read: 'My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' These words so assured and satisfied and inspired Paul that he cried out: 'Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.' There is no reason to suppose that these exact words were put into Paul's mouth. It is sufficient to know that the words of Jesus thrilled and cheered and inspired him into glad submission to the will and purpose of God in his affliction, and in his joy and satisfaction his heart overflowed with devotion to his Lord and found verbal expression in these words.

One day the Psalmist was so filled with the sense of God's forgiving love and provident care that his whole soul bubbled over in song, and he cried out:

'Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless His holy name.

'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits:

'Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's.'

These words are the words of the writer, but they are written in the glad sense of all God's tender care and goodness and redeeming love, out of a heart that is inspired by the ever-present Holy Spirit to adoring worship and praise.

The words are the words of the writer, but the rich experience and deep feelings and adoring wonder from which they flowed are the work and inspiration of the Holy One of Israel. Hallelujah!

'I know the Bible is inspired,' wrote a great soul-winner, 'because it inspires me.' And so it does to every one who, wholly devoted to Christ and simply trusting, is filled with the Spirit. It speaks as the very voice of God. God is in the word and 'the words . . . are spirit and life.'

The manner and extent of inspiration may always be a matter of debate, but the fact of inspiration is the joy and strength of every 'twice-born' soul.

II

'The poor ye have always with you,' said the Master, and we must wisely and adequately minister to their pitiful and crying words. But it is equally probable that the feeble-minded and the weak will be ever with us. And Paul has exhorted and instructed us to comfort and support them and to be patient.

But there is another class, the chronic seekers who, times without number, come to the penitent-form, who seem to be tramping, tramping for ever on an endless treadmill, who are with us and need wise and patient help as much or more than any other class of people. They have been to the penitent-form so often that many Soldiers and Officers have lost interest in them, and have but little, if any, hope for them. But they are a challenge to our faith, our love and pity, our patience, our spiritual intelligence and resourcefulness. We must not let them perish in full view, and we must not let them slip away from view and perish in the night. They belong to us. They are our charge, and, if possible, we must win them and lead them into a joyful experience of Salvation and perfect love. We need to take ourselves in hand in

dealing with them, for possibly their failure is an evidence of our weakness of faith, our lack of burning, compassionate zeal, or of our spiritual and mental ignorance, poverty, laziness.

We need to do some sober, hard thinking, some real praying, and 'stir up the gift of God' within us, if we are to fathom their deep needs and help them. Personally, I fear that in many instances it is the faulty, hasty way they are dealt with at the penitent-form that in part, if not wholly, accounts for their miserable failures.

A thousand times I have trembled for seekers as I have seen people dealing with them, who I have feared needed help themselves.

In the old days, when my hearing was more acute, I seldom let any one leave my penitent-form without dealing with him myself. It was a great tax upon my time and strength, but my heart would not rest in peace until I had done my utmost to lead each one into light, and into the sweet and assured rest of faith.

I felt I must make full proof of my ministry, and I judged of its acceptance with God and its harmony with His truth, His principles and Spirit, by its fruits in joyously saved and sanctified souls.

III

'Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully (negligently), and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood,' wrote Jeremiah. And 'He that winneth souls is wise,' said Solomon.

Several years ago I was campaigning in a splendid city in which is located the Territorial Headquarters of The Army for that country. It is a Salvation Army City. In it are many flourishing Corps and Army Institutions which command the respect and high regard of the citizens of both high and low degree.

In two Corps in residential sections of the city I conducted Meetings which were largely attended, and in which people responded promptly to my invitations. Then I went to the down-town, Central Corps at the Territorial Headquarters. Here, too, the crowds were large and attentive, but it was next to impossible to get any one to the penitent-form except as a result of the most dogged personal dealing and persuasion. To me this was a sore disappointment, for I always feel that if I preach the truth in love, luminously, pointedly, persuasively, with constant reliance upon the Holy Ghost, the people will promptly yield to my invitations, and if they do not do so I feel the trouble must be with my spirit or manner of preaching. Almost invariably many do respond. But not so at this Corps. I had been there on two different occasions before when the people seemed much more responsive, and I wondered at the present hardness.

After I had preached and poured out my heart upon the people, Officers and Soldiers promptly began to 'fish,' but it was only after long effort that they would lead any one to the penitent-form. This continued for several Meetings, and I was greatly perplexed. I noticed that those who came did not seem to be broken in spirit. There were no tears, but neither was there any levity. Usually there was a hard, set look on the faces of those who came, which seemed to say, 'Well, if I must, I will, but I feel it is useless to come. Nothing will happen.'

I noted further that as soon as one knelt at the penitent-form some Soldier or Officer would rush to his side and enter into conversation with him, and in a few minutes would look up and say, 'He is all right,' and the man would rise up with the same hard, set look on his face and take his seat. There was no tear in the eye, no light on the face, nothing that indicated that he had met with Jesus and found a great deliverance and peace.

On inquiry I found that most of those who were coming to the penitent-form were well known to the Officers and Soldiers, and had been forward again and again.

Loud trumpeting and singing in the Prayer Meeting may keep up a lively interest, but they sadly interfere with my hearing, so that it is most difficult for me to deal with seekers. (I wish we might have stringed instruments instead of brass in our Prayer Meetings.) I tried to find out how these people at the penitent-form were being dealt with, and I discovered that they were usually asked one or two questions, then they were told to obey God and trust, asked if they would do so, and when they said they would they were declared to be 'all right,' got on their feet and sent to a seat, as dead and hopeless, apparently, as when they came.

In some instances where their weaknesses and failures were well known they were dealt with in a severe, unsympathetic way which seemed to me anything but helpful, and quite unbecoming from one who felt that he himself had been hewn from the rock and lifted out of miry clay. A sinner saved by grace must be careful how he deals with a fellow-sinner, lest, like Moses, he finds he has displeased the Lord.

Finally, a Soldier came to the penitent-form, and not only threw himself down at the form, but upon and over it in a way that seemed to me to indicate hopelessness. I took my Bible and knelt beside him, and I soon found out that he had come there again and again, that his trouble was fleshly sin, that he loathed himself, but felt powerless when temptation was upon him; that he was eager to break away from his sin, but that he was its servant (John viii. 34; Romans vi. 16), its bond slave, and it mocked his struggles and good resolutions to quit it and be free. I felt, I saw, that hitherto he had been led to make resolutions and promises and told to trust in Christ, but that he had never been made to really see Christ as his Lord, his Redeemer, his Saviour, who was down with him on his battlefield, and this I felt I must make him see, and to this I set myself with prayer and full purpose of heart.

I told him he had been trusting to the strength of his own resolutions, in which there is no strength, and that he would surely fall again unless he found the Lord. We 'are kept by the power of God through faith.' Faith is the coupler that links us on to God and His power. If the link fails the power cannot operate in us. We must believe, and keep on believing, if we are to be kept. He saw it. He felt he must have God's power, God's presence, else he would fall again and fall for evermore. When I was assured that he realized this, I then opened my Bible and said to him, 'You have made promises to God, now let us see what promises God makes to you.' And we read together: 'God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans v.8). 'Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound' (v.20). 'Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace' (vi. 14). 'If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness' (1 John i. 9).

In these promises he saw God's love for him in spite of his sin, and his face began to brighten; and from lolling over the penitent-form hopeless and seemingly as spineless as a jelly fish, he began to straighten up; it was as though a new backbone were entering into him.

Then I sought to show him how God promises to enter the battle with him against his sins and mocking, gripping habits, and we read: 'Fear thou not' (Isaiah xli. 10).

'You have been afraid, haven't you -- afraid you would fall? You are afraid now, are you not?' I asked him. 'Oh, yes! I have been afraid and I am now afraid,' he replied. 'But listen, "Fear thou not; for I am with thee."

'This is God's promise to you, my brother. He says, " I am with thee." Do you not see that you are not alone? He is on the battlefield, He is in the thick of the fight with you. In the darkness of the night, in the glare of the day, when alone or in the throng, He is with you. Do you not see it? Will you, do you, believe it?' And he began to see.

"Be not dismayed." When temptation assails you, when the enemy comes mocking and threatening, you are not alone, my brother. "Be not dismayed; for I am thy God."

'He is your God, call upon Him, trust Him, and laugh at your foe in the name of the Lord, as the stripling David laughed at and defied Goliath. I will strengthen thee." Hitherto you have fallen because you were weak, but see, read it, believe it, God says, "I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee."

'You wouldn't fall into your shameful sin if some strong, true, trusted friend were by your side, would you? And note, God is with you! and He says He will help you. Away with your fears!

Yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

'Will you trust Him? Will you cast to the winds your fears and henceforth go into every battle believing that God is with you, that Almighty strength is pledged to you, that help is at hand, and that you shall be upheld? Will you lift your eyes to the Lord and trust instead of trembling and quailing when the enemies of your soul assail you?'

It was a joy to see my man. He looked, he read. Light burst upon him and beamed in his face. He seemed to be looking into the face of God. He straightened up like a man.

'I see, Oh, I see! I will, I do trust Him,' and with thanksgiving he arose in the power of the Spirit, and through the remainder of that campaign he was radiant, and I trust he so remains to this day, and so he does if he obediently, believingly fights with the 'sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.'

He saw the face of his Divine Kinsman, Redeemer, and heard the voice of the everlasting Father in the Word, and life and power and joy and peace flowed into him as he believed.

How do we get acquainted with God? By the work of the Holy Spirit in our minds and hearts as we penitently, obediently believe. But what are we to believe? We are to believe what He has said -- 'These things have I spoken unto you, that My joy might be in you, and that your joy might be full,' said Jesus.

His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption of the world through lust' (2 Peter i. 3, 4).

If we want to be strong, we must live 'by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,' said Jesus, as the Devil thrust sore at Him.

'And when He had spoken unto me, I was strengthened, and said, Let my Lord speak; for Thou hast strengthened me,' said Daniel (Daniel x. 19). And how was he strengthened? By the revelation of God through His Word.

How is a little child quieted, assured, and filled with peace in the night? By the presence and word of father, of mother. And so we are assured, and made strong, 'made perfect and thoroughly furnished unto all

good works,' through 'all Scripture given by inspiration of God,' and brought to our remembrance and applied to our need by the Holy Ghost, as we believe. Let us feed our people with the sincere milk of the Word 'and they will grow thereby,' and they shall not tremble before the face of any mocking foe, but 'one shall chase a thousand and two shall put ten thousand to flight.'

While others debate about the inspiration of the Word, let us eat it, drink it, preach it, and live thereby, and we shall live in the power of 'an endless life.' Hallelujah! It is still, as in the days of Job and the Psalmist, 'sweeter than honey and the honeycomb' to those who believe and obey it, and 'more to be desired than necessary food.'

The Bible

Within that awful volume lies The mystery of mysteries.

Happiest they of human race To whom God has granted grace

To read, to fear, to hope, to pray, To lift the latch and force the way.

And better had they ne'er been born Who read to doubt, or read to scorn.

So wrote Sir Walter Scott. And when dying he said to his son-in-law, 'Bring me the Book.'

'Which one, sir? ' asked the son-in-law.

'There is but one,' replied the dying man. 'Bring me the Bible.'

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