

Is Anybody Listening?

God still has a problem. It's this: Is anyone really listening? Most everyone (in the Western world, at least) has access to a copy of his Book, but not everyone reads it and understands it. As a matter of fact, though there are parts of the Bible that anyone can understand, no one understands all of it. But God is only concerned that we keep listening and learning so he can communicate to us what we need to know when we need to know it. He is so lovingly practical that he doesn't want to burden our minds and hearts with a lot of academic, un-lived truth. He just wants to keep equipping us for all we face in life. So there's no graduation from this course of study--it's a lifetime curriculum.

It's also a tough curriculum. It's not easy to understand God's Book. He has things to say that are beyond the realm of our experience, so no wonder it's difficult. But the Lord says repeatedly, "He who has an ear to hear, let him hear." Since he made us with two ears, he's not questioning our anatomy, only whether we're really listening and responding to his Word.

He knows that his are words to live by, for he said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4 and Deut. 8:3). Our Lord Jesus Christ lived by the vital truth of God's Word. His life was a pattern of obedience to God's Word and he was ever quoting it and teaching it as the word of truth. He said to the Father, "Thy word is truth" (John 17:17b).

Regarding the Old Testament scriptures he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (Luke 11:28). And to proud Pharisees he said, "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition...thus making void the word of God..." (Mark 7 :9, 13).

He attested to the Old Testament record concerning Adam and Eve, Moses, and Jonah. He attested to the unchanging truth of "the law and the prophets" (a term for the Old Testament Scriptures) with complete confidence in their credibility and reliability as the Word of God.

- He speaks concerning Adam and Eve:

He answered, "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" (Matt. 19:4, 5).

Here he quotes from Genesis 1 and 2, the creation story, treating it as authoritative.

- He has confidence in Moses' writings, and the prophets:

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

- He quotes the Psalms and prophets:

"I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me'" (John 13:18, a quotation from Ps. 41 :9).

...and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:17-19, a quotation from Isa. 61: 1-2).

And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

- He insists on the authority and permanence of the Old Testament scriptures:

Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished (Matt. 5: 17, 18 NASV).

- He claims to speak for God in his earthly ministry:

...The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works...He who does not love Me does not keep My words: and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me (John 14: 10, 24 NASV).

- He gives warrant for New Testament revelation:

These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you....But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you also are witnesses, because you have been with me from the beginning....I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 14:25, 26, 15:26, 27; and 16:12-14).

After all, we who are called by his name should take no other view than that of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

That means we must listen to God's word with both ears.

The Attitude That Promotes Understanding

But how do we make sure we're getting it straight? I can't tell you how many times I've heard the objection, "There are so many interpretations of the Bible I don't think we can be sure of what it means. So why study it?" My usual reply is to ask the objector to interpret a verse like John 3: 16. He usually finds he *can* understand it. Hopefully, this approach will get people started.

I hope differences of interpretive opinion don't deter you, for there is a simple explanation for them. It is this: we all have limited understanding of the truth, so our areas of ignorance can easily explain our lack of agreement. After all, scientists often disagree in their interpretation of the physical world, but this only spurs their interest and stimulates them to deeper study.

Regarding the Scriptures, through the Apostle Paul, God testifies of *all* of us, "Now I know in part" (1 Cor. 13:12b).

So we, like many scientists do, should take the humble place of the *learner*, for a lifetime. The most important issue is the attitude with which we approach the Scriptures.

The Book That Goes with Man

As we view man, we see that he is unique. He is uniquely capable of thinking and reasoning. When I talk to some of my scientific friends, I marvel at their ability to think in abstract, unseen, and unseeable realms of investigation. When I hear a great symphony orchestra, I am amazed at the ability of the composer and the orchestra to create and execute such a masterpiece of sound and rhythm which can profoundly move my feelings and responses. These marvelous talents are God-given and unique to the human species.

Turning to the Bible, I am equally amazed at its richness of expression of the great themes of the grace and mercy of God extended to us because he loves us. I am amazed by the honesty with which he tells us the truth about ourselves even when it hurts, and then assures us of his redemptive answer to the hurt. The clarity with which the Scriptures see what I'm like suggests that its authors must be reading my mail or my mind--or else, the ultimate Author must be the one who made me and knows me through and through.

This knowledge could be deadly, and totally unwelcome, if God were not concerned about my ultimate good through it all. But since he is concerned about my well-being, it seems to me I can handle anything God has to say to me.

So ours should be an attitude of openness and expectancy when we study the Bible. If we examine the finished products, man and God's Book as they exist, we come to the conclusion that they correlate, and the Bible is the Book that goes with man. For the truth of the Bible speaks so clearly and forcefully to the crucial issues of life that the correlation is unmistakable.

I don't want myself, or you, to be naive and gullible in these matters, but neither do I want to be like a stubborn, unreasoning donkey. A teachable spirit is a joy to see--in mules or in men. The Bible talks about the "simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3 KJV). The word in the Greek text for "simplicity" means mental honesty, or openness of heart. This attitude of approach to the Scriptures is not simplistic, but rather it leads to the discovery of the most profound truth --truth that applies to life.

Understanding Language

The use of language for communication is uniquely a faculty of man. As early in the Bible as the second chapter of Genesis, God instructed Adam to name the animals. Thus it seems basic to man's nature to use language to express what he sees and feels.

It would appear that the earlier forms of writing were in pictographs, in which the written character pictured, in stylized fashion, the object observed. The development of more sophisticated expression through alphabets, words, grammatical usage, and the various parts of speech is virtually untraceable. It seems, though, that communication through spoken or written symbols is inherent in man.

Communicating through Symbols

Languages are basically symbolic, whether spoken or written, and if one does not have an understanding of how the symbols are employed to communicate thoughts and concepts, there is no communication. If you have ever visited a foreign country where you did not understand the language, this fact comes home to you with a bit of a shock. All communication in human language is based on a common understanding of the symbols used, and includes a mutual understanding of words in their meaning and also in their grammatical relationships. In familiar surroundings and in a familiar tongue, we ordinarily take this common information for granted and never consciously apply the rules that govern our expression. Most of us who studied English grammar thought it was a bore and tried to forget it as soon as we passed the course. Nevertheless, all our communication in English is based on this foundational content. But if we seriously study the English Bible with any confidence that God is speaking through it in verbally-inspired tones, we had better pay conscious attention to language in its detailed use of words, sentences, paragraphs, idioms, grammatical structure, and all. For those of you who feel the need of a quickie refresher course on English grammar, Appendix A in the back of the book will be of interest.

We need to remember that originally the Bible was not written in English but in Hebrew and Greek. What we are reading today are simply *translations* into English. In this connection, we must also recognize that each language has its peculiar word usage and grammar, and that a knowledge of these peculiarities will enhance our understanding of the text. We should also recognize that languages are living, growing things--constantly changing with changes in usage. Words start with a root meaning, are adapted to various derived meanings, and sometimes end up expressing the very opposite of their original content.

We can see that the Bible interpreter's task is complicated by these facts: (1) the Bible was recorded centuries ago in what are now ancient languages, (2) most of us don't read it in its original language, and (3) it was delivered to people with widely different cultural backgrounds from ours. Thus, we must be careful to hear the word in its cultural and temporal setting: yet its truth transcends all temporal, racial, language, and cultural boundaries.

Some Encouraging Words

In case you're getting discouraged, let me hasten to add that there is ample source material in English for you to delve into the Hebrew language without knowing Hebrew, and the Greek language without knowing Greek. How does that strike you? To me it adds an additional element of intrigue, and encourages me to be a good word detective. It's amazing what one can discover with a little bit of diligent research.

Which Version?

People often wonder which English translation of the Bible they should use, and they are troubled by the multiplicity of versions available today. I'd like to suggest that this is not a problem, but a blessing. Each translation represents untold hours of careful scholarship through which the translators endeavored to carry over the best sense of the original language. No translation is a perfect expression of the original, simply because there are often no word-for-word equivalents in the two languages. That's why biblical scholars study Hebrew and Greek, plus a number of related languages, to get as close as possible to the original *intent*. All of the scholarly translations, however, are sufficiently accurate to be trusted to give us an understanding of the truth. So, whether you choose to study the New American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, or the older King James Version, you can hear God speak to you through any of them.

The most practical way to resolve a problem in the English text is to compare translations when in doubt, even utilizing the paraphrases, such as *Phillips' New Testament* and *The Living Bible*. When using these, however, it is wise to rest your confidence more heavily on the standard versions. In my opinion, the Phillips translation has stayed much closer to the original language than *The Living Bible*, but either paraphrase is useful *if you are careful to compare and weigh the different* renderings. Eternity magazine published a helpful review of English versions which is listed in the bibliography in the Appendix.

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