

CHAPTER 1

GOD'S WORD

What is the source of our knowledge of God? For that matter, is there an authority we can consult that is sufficient to guide us in all matters that concern this life and the next? Indeed, there is. The Holy Scriptures provide that guidance for us.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.
(2 Tim. 3:16–17)

It is true that there is a revelation of God in nature. God's creative work and His providential guidance of all things give a very clear testimony concerning His existence, His wisdom, and His power. This revelation is sufficient to condemn men for their stubborn refusal to acknowledge their need for God. But nature is not sufficient to save us or to give us the knowledge we need to please God in the way we conduct our lives. The testimony of creation can be very impressive. What immense orbits some heavenly visitors have! Comets appear in our skies that last appeared there before the birth of the Savior two thousand years ago. How large the purposes of God are! As Paul the Apostle taught the church at Rome, such things speak of God's "invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20). The apostle goes on to say mankind is without an excuse for not acknowledging the

existence of God and the sovereign right that God has to rule His creatures. Such revelations of God, as exist in nature and providence, are merciful in character.

It is in written revelation that the Lord has given us a divinely inspired testimony concerning His way of revealing Himself in times past, and particularly the revelation of Himself in Christ. We call this written revelation of God's will the Bible, or the Holy Scriptures. This collection of divinely inspired books consists of both the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the New Testament. The New Testament is the testimony of certain divinely ordained men who were used by God to give us an authoritative word about our Lord Jesus Christ and the meaning of His death and resurrection from the dead. It is in the Bible that we discover the truth that we need to know, concerning our sins and our present standing before God. It is in the Bible that we discover what God has done for the salvation of undeserving sinners. The apostle Peter gave testimony concerning the authenticity of the Old Testament when he said "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

Notice that Peter identified the Holy Spirit as the true author of Scripture. God was pleased to use human minds and pens to give us the Word of God. But it is truly God's Word. Paul put it this way: "We impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:13).

THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

The books of what we call the Old Testament were accepted as Scripture by our Lord Jesus Christ. Unlike the Sadducees of His day, who denied the inspiration and authority of much of

the Bible, our Lord clearly accepted these books as given to us by God.

After the last of the Old Testament books were written—about 400 years before Christ—Hebrew historians and poets continued to make their contributions to the literature of their day. Many years later, in the Christian era, these books—which have come to be called the Apocrypha—came to be published as a part of some translations of the Bible. These works are valuable for our understanding of the times but should not be taken for God's own Word. They should not be regarded as authoritative but should be used as we would any other work of ancient literature.

The New Testament is the collected writings of the men God used to give us a lasting testimony as to the identity of the Lord Jesus Christ, and to explain to us the meaning of His death on the cross and of His resurrection from the dead. These books also teach us how the Lord fulfilled all the truths concerning the Messiah's ministry on behalf of sinners. These things had been revealed to God's prophets in Old Testament times.

Taken together, these two great testaments form the Bible, which is God's Word to man. It is the written revelation of everything we need to know in order to find salvation and live in the way that is pleasing to our God.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

How do we come to know the Scriptures are authoritative truth given to us by God? First, we need to know that the Bible is not dependent on the testimony of any human being, of any church, or of any scholars. The Word of God is its own testimony. It is self-authenticating. It is the *living* Word of God that the Lord takes and touches our hearts with when we hear

it proclaimed, when we read it, or when it is read to us. The apostle John put it this way:

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. (1 John 5:9–10)

When the apostle Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, he reminded them that they had not treated the word from the Lord as just another theory or opinion of man.

We also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers. (1 Thess. 2:13)

When you and I read a play by a great writer, we may say it is truly an inspired work, but when we talk about the inspiration of the Bible, we are discussing something that is wholly different. We believe as Christians that the Bible is the work of God's own Spirit. The Lord used various men to pen the words of Scripture. When we read an epistle of Peter, we can even see Peter's personality expressing itself. The same is true of all the human authors of the Bible. But we also believe, as they did, that the unseen author of all the Scriptures is God. And we believe and teach that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the writers of the Bible comes to our hearts today to be the "witness" we need to convince us of the truthfulness of the Word of God. John spoke about this work of the Spirit in this way: "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge" (1 John 2:20).

John could speak in this way because he remembered what the Lord Jesus Christ had taught him while here on the earth: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13).

The Bible is God’s Word and is wholly true. It must become the only authority for the Christian’s life. It must be our standard, as it alone has the right to judge all the doctrines and opinions of men. When the Lord Jesus Christ was tempted by Satan to use His divine power to make bread from stones, the Lord replied,

“It is written,

‘Man shall not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of
God.’” (Matt. 4:4)

UNDERSTANDING GOD’S WORD

Near the end of the last book of the Bible is a stern word of warning directed toward those who might think they have the right to add to God’s Word or to take away from it (Rev. 22:18–19). Lost man does not enjoy the “hard” teachings of God’s Word (John 6:60). The perfect righteousness, which is described for us in the Scriptures, forces us to confront our own sin. The desire to abridge or change the Word of God is a great temptation for those who feel its condemnation.

We have the Spirit of God if we are Christ’s. God’s own Spirit indwells His people. But this does not mean we can claim the same ability the prophets and apostles were given when the Lord used them to write His Word. We do not have inspiration. But we do have illumination. No person will be able to really understand and accept the teachings of the Bible unless the Holy Spirit enables that person to do so (1 Cor. 2:14).

This is especially true of unbelievers. They need a special work of the Spirit to understand what the Bible teaches concerning their alienation from God and the dangers that await them if they do not repent. Those of us who have come to know the Lord still need the illuminating work of God to understand and apply the Scriptures. Then we will be able to use the direct commands of the Lord found in His Word to live our lives for His glory, and we will be able to take the general principles of righteousness found in the Bible and apply them to our lives. We will need to use the intelligence the Lord has given us as we trust the Holy Spirit to do His illuminating work.

It is not that the Lord causes us to enter a trance or to have things revealed in visions as some did in ancient times. Those things were for that age. But we have a full revelation of God's character and will because of what the Lord Jesus Christ did while here on earth.

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Heb. 1:1–2)

This revelation in Christ is all we need. Our task is to study it, understand it, and obey it.

We need not think of the Bible as too hard to understand. It is true that some passages are by their very nature difficult. This should not surprise us when we consider it is God, in all of His infinite being, that is the subject matter of the Scriptures. Speaking of the epistles of Paul, the apostle Peter wrote, "There are some things in [his letters] that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16).