

Peter's Epistles #11

Natural and Special Revelation

(also available on-line at Ichthys.com)
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Review: As we mentioned in our last study, the book of 1st Peter is greatly concerned with spiritual growth (especially in respect to the role which suffering plays as an agent in the Christian growth process). We therefore need to examine the doctrine of spiritual growth in some detail before moving on with our exegesis. It will, moreover, be profitable for us to do so, for the very purpose of our lives as Christians is to grow spiritually, and to help others to do the same. Helping others to grow is called ministry, and depends in part upon each individual's specific spiritual gift. The process of growth, on the other hand, is the same for all Christians. Although it is a broad topic, spiritual growth does have a single, simple focus: truth. To put the matter as plainly as possible: spiritual growth consists primarily of learning God's truth and applying it to our lives. Truth, therefore, is the key to the Christian life.

Truth: So what is truth? To begin with, we can say that in the midst of the devil's world, God's truth is the one thing that can pull us out of our self-centered preoccupation with our own problems, and orient us to God's plan, to God's will. Truth alone instructs us, comforts us, encourages us, and points out the direction in which we should go. More than any other principle, it is the knowledge and application of God's truth which distinguishes believers in the Lord Jesus Christ from the rest of the world, and Jesus proclaimed that the reason for His earthly ministry was to bear witness to that same truth. When He was being interrogated by Pontius Pilate (Jn.18:37-38), Jesus said "You say that I am a king. Yes, for this very purpose I have been born, and I have come into the world in order that I might testify to the truth." Pilate's response to Jesus was: "What is truth?" While Pilate was never really interested in God's truth, for believers, truth is the food, the very mother's milk by which we live and grow (1Pet.2:2). So how should we answer Pilate's question? What is truth really?

First, all truth comes from God, for God is the truth. Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life". To know Jesus Christ, then, is to know the truth. But how, this side of heaven, can we ever hope to fully "know" the omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent creator (1Cor.13:12)? In His grace, God has provided mankind with a specific body of truth for use in this life, a treasury of knowledge which is both knowable and usable. This body of truth is divisible into two broad categories:

- (1) truth available to all mankind through *natural revelation*.

(2) truth that is only accessible to believers in Jesus Christ by way of "*special*" (or supernatural) *revelation*.

Natural Revelation: God is the Creator of the universe (Gen.1:1). Accordingly, the universe and all that is in it bears the mark of its Creator. We can tap into this category of truth by observing the creation, and marveling at its magnitude and complexity. Now while there is admittedly much that can be learned about the nature of God in this empirical way, the scripture emphasizes two principle "truths" that God has designed for the unbeliever to derive from contemplating the natural world.

(1) *The fact of God's existence is plain from contemplating God's creation.* Psalm 19:1-6 states that "the heavens tell of God's glory" (cf. Job.36:24-25; Ps.8:1-3; 97:6). That is, by contemplating the majesty of the universe, the beauty of the creation, men know in their hearts that a Creator has to exist. Paul also affirms this point unequivocally:

For that which can be known about God [from everyday experience] is obvious to them, because God has made it obvious. His nature, though invisible, is nevertheless plainly apparent, and has been since His foundation of the world, for it may be clearly inferred from this creation of His – [this is true of] both His eternal power and His divinity – so that they are without any excuse.

Romans 1:20

Moreover, Paul's statement here advances the argument beyond what the Psalmist had to say. In Romans 1:20, we not only see *the fact* of God's existence from the marvelous nature of His creation, but we also derive from studying His creation some idea of just *what sort of God* He is. He is just and righteous in addition to being all powerful. This concept is amplified in the second "truth" which men can learn from pondering nature.

(2) *The fact of God's existence is plain from contemplating the concept of right and wrong.* Also in Romans (2:14-16), Paul explains that some Gentiles, who do not have God's Word to guide them, nevertheless do what is right instinctively (Greek *physei*, "by nature"). This is because God has implanted in the conscience of all mankind the essential ideas of right and wrong (cf. 1Cor.11:14-15). Paul goes on to say that the conscience of these gentiles sometimes approves their actions, and sometimes condemns them (v.15), so a consciousness of sin is also part of our human heritage as descendants of Adam and Eve (cf. Prov.20:27, where evaluation of the heart is a natural function of man's spirit).

Without any direct communication from God, without any visitation from angels, without any Bible teaching, indeed, without even a Bible, all mankind is aware of certain spiritual truths from their observation of matters plainly obvious to everyone. Whether they wish to acknowledge the fact or not, in truth, all people realize that there is a God who made the world, and who made them. All understand that He is a just and righteous God. All comprehend that there is right and wrong, good and evil. And all know that, no matter how good they may try to be, they are not without evil themselves (these points are all the more true following the advent of the Holy

Spirit: Jn.16:8-11). God, in his matchless grace, has so ordered the world that even without any missionary contact or special "signs", all mankind is aware of the fundamental problem of life: we all face death, and, without some sort of help, we all face the problem of confronting a just and righteous God who surely exists, with no excuse for the evil we have done in our lives. In their hearts, at some point in their lives, if only for a brief moment, everyone comes to this realization. One would think that this would be motivation enough to desire more information about God, for if there is to be a solution, then clearly it must rest with God Himself.

Special Revelation (or "supernatural revelation"): God graciously obliges anyone who thirsts to know more about Him beyond the basic truths which can be discerned through contemplation of the natural world. Whenever someone becomes aware of God's existence through natural means and desires to know more, God faithfully provides the information necessary to begin a relationship with Him (the gospel message), and the information necessary to grow spiritually after that (in today's world, that means the Bible, along with good Bible teaching). Speaking about the Gospel message, Jesus said "Whoever drinks of this water which I shall give him, will not thirst forever, but the water which I shall give to him will become in him a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn.4:14; cf. Jn.3:5; Eph.5:26). God never lets anyone go thirsty for His truth. Indeed, He invites us all to come and drink our fill as He says in Isaiah 55:1, "Ho, everyone who thirsts, let him come to the waters!" This provision for believer and unbeliever alike of information which is in the literal sense "supernatural" is called *special revelation*.

Throughout the course of Human history, God has employed various and sundry means of communicating His truth to men and women who had a heart to receive it. He has used signs and visions, dreams and angels, prophets and priests. Today, however, the only available primary source of God's truth (His special revelation) is the Bible. But while it is possible for the unbeliever to discover the Gospel in the Bible on his own, and for the believer to extract certain principles of truth unaided, this is not the exclusive procedure for acquiring God's truth. To use an analogy, if the Bible is the spring in which the water of truth is found, the most satisfying and efficient way to quench one's thirst from it is to use a cup. Just as a spring contains water, but is not designed to dispense it (unlike a drinking fountain), so the Bible contains all the information an unbeliever needs to be saved, and all the information a believer needs to grow spiritually, but not in a readily assimilable form (being in literary rather than manual form). That is why God has appointed in the church intermediary vessels - Bible teachers - to help in the process of dispensing His truth in more accessible form. The expounding of the scriptures by qualified teachers is thus an important supplement for believers to the likewise essential practice of personal Bible study. No person who is truly serious about spiritual growth can safely dispense with either.

Now an unbeliever could very well stumble around in the Bible for months without coming across a clear expression of the gospel message, especially if he started with the Old Testament (although the gospel is certainly there to be found: cf. Jn.5:39). In most cases, however, it is not necessary for him to take such a laborious route to the spring of eternal life. That is because God has graciously provided "cups" for interested unbelievers to drink from. What are these "cups",

you ask? Well they are nothing less than you and I! We are the intermediary vessels of God's truth for the unsaved (2Cor.4:7). That is why all of us believers should have a clear understanding of the gospel message, and be able to communicate it easily and quickly to someone who is thirsty for Jesus Christ.

"Gospel", an English word originally meaning "good news", is our translation for the Greek word *euangelion* (cf. "evangelical"). There can certainly be no better "good news" than that God has provided a way for us to avoid His condemnation and have eternal life instead! When we share this good news with an unsaved person, we are the cup, the simple earthenware pot, that has the honor of conveying the priceless water of life, God's truth about Jesus Christ which is the gospel message. There is no doubt that it is God's will that we do so whenever the opportunity presents itself, for God "wishes all to be saved and to come to a full understanding of the truth" (1Tim.2:4; cf. 2Pet.3:9; Jn.3:16). We use the word "gospel" in this sense then: the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ; namely that by believing in Him, we shall be saved from God's wrath and have eternal life.

Now while the gospel contains many facets, and touches most of the doctrines of scripture, for practical purposes, the unbeliever need only understand and act upon Paul's command in Acts 16:31: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved", for salvation comes by God's grace through faith in Christ (Eph.2:6-8). So the unsaved person can be saved without ever reading a Bible. His thirst is quenched easily and quickly, but the water of truth which accomplished this *does* have its source, that is to say its documentation, in the Bible. It flowed from the scriptures into *our* hearts, through *our* mouths and then into his or her heart, and thus accomplished the task for which the Lord sent it forth (Is.55:10-11).

What about the believer then? The principle of the cup holds good for believers too. Whenever we help other believers learn the truth of God's Word, we play the role of the intermediary vessel. Priscilla and Aquila had been taught principles of truth extensively by the apostle Paul, and were thus well equipped to instruct Apollos "more accurately" about Christianity (Acts 18:24ff). So we all have the responsibility to speak the truth, one to another (Eph.4:15, 25). Whether it be in the communication of some principle of doctrine we have learned, or a simple word of encouragement, we will probably all be called upon to "teach" at one time or another. In this way, the Church builds itself up as its individual members grow spiritually through this network of mutual provision and support (Eph.4:16; Col.2:19). Whenever we speak with other believers, therefore, we should have it in mind to "salt our speech with grace" (Col.4:6), offering the encouragement of the truth of God's word. Sustained spiritual growth requires a steady supply of such well-prepared "food", and that is why God has included the gift of "teacher" in the catalog of spiritual gifts given to the Church (Eph.4:11ff.). Some of the factors crucial in the process of spiritual growth, that is, the process of assimilating God's truth, are: (1) personal commitment, (2) humility, (3) systematic Bible teaching, and (4) the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Review: The purpose for our lives as Christians is to grow spiritually and help others do the same. Spiritual growth comes as a result of understanding and applying God's truth. While we

can know certain truths about God through observation of the world (natural revelation), and can come to have an eternal relationship with Him by understanding only one simple truth (the gospel: salvation comes through faith in Christ), spiritual growth requires the assimilation of the *whole realm of truth* contained in the scripture. Next time we shall examine the elements required for assimilating truth, and consider the process by which spiritual growth takes place.