

## Trembling at the Word

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The prophet Isaiah uses a very interesting metaphor in the final chapter of his prophecy:

...“But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word (Isaiah 66:2)

What does it mean, “But to this one I will look?” The obvious reference is to the Aaronic Benediction given to the priests in order to bless Israel (Numbers 6:22-27). This blessing of the Almighty upon His people is couched in terms of God “turning His face” toward His people, or “shining His countenance upon them.” All of this is summed up in the word “look” in Isaiah’s message: when God “looks” toward a person, He has purposed to bless that person.

And what kind of person is it whom God intends to bless? Those who are “humble and contrite of spirit.” This does not describe a particular personality type, but rather one who is faithful to God’s word. Here, the “word of God” is most specifically the message of God through His prophet Isaiah, but could, of course, be extended to all of the words of all the prophets, that is, what we know today as the Scriptures. To be specific, God’s blessing comes upon the person who “trembles” at God’s word.

What should we understand by the term “tremble?” The only other time in Scripture that we find this same Hebrew word *חָרַד* (*chared*) construed with the preposition *עַל* (*‘al*, as it is in Isaiah 66:2), is 1 Samuel 4:13:

When he came, behold, Eli was sitting on his seat by the road eagerly watching, because his heart was *trembling for* the ark of God. So the man came to tell it in the city, and all the city cried out.

Eli is concerned or worried about the Ark of God. He is anxious to see it safely in the hands of Israel and her priests, when presently it had been captured by the Philistines. Thus his heart *trembles* when he receives the bad news.

The use of the word *chared* in the Eli story gives us a sense of what Isaiah means. When Isaiah writes about one who is “humble and contrite of spirit,” he is describing a person who is fully concerned that God’s word have its rightful place as the powerful word of the King that is to be obeyed. Trembling at God’s word means receiving it as the gracious yet powerful word of the Almighty that comes with dignity and authority. The word of God is not common, it is extra-ordinary. It comes to mankind through the direct miracle of God’s grace, in which He clothes His eternal truth in the garments of human language. As such it comes with an awesome power that makes the believing soul tremble. We fear to think what might happen if we were merely to wink at His word.

From the beginning of mankind’s existence, however, the enemy has sought to dissuade God’s image-bearer from trembling at His word. The Deceiver planted the seeds of doubt into the mind of Chavah (Eve) with this nagging question: “Indeed, has God said?” (Genesis 3:1). From the start there was a battle for God’s word. Would it be received as that which it is by its very nature, eternal and unchanging, or could God’s word be marginalized and rationalized in such a way as to make it irrelevant? Surely Chavah knew that God had given the commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That could not be denied. Satan was not suggesting that God had never spoken, but rather he questioned whether God had the right to require obedience of those to whom He gave His word. “Perhaps,” the Deceiver subtly suggested, “God is really a weak and selfish being who must resort to lies and deception in order to maintain His place of sovereignty.” If that were the case, then no one need tremble at His word. Defying God’s word would bring freedom from His tyrannical

rule, and open the door to self-advancement.

This lie of the Enemy has been repeated time and again, though it certainly has worn different masks. From ancient times there were those who simply considered the Scriptures to be the product of men, and therefore without any divine authority. The Sages speak of this when they declared that anyone who denied the divine origin of the Torah had forfeited their place in the world to come.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in our day there are those who relegate the Scriptures to ancient mythology, continuing to follow the higher critical schools of German rationalism from the early 1900's that found the origin of the Tanach rooted in pagan myth and religious superstitions. Such a view of Scripture divests it of any real authority.

Of course, those of us who have accepted the Scriptures as the divinely inspired word of God could never agree with this liberal perspective. Yet the Enemy's challenge of God's right to demand our obedience comes masked in far more subtle garb. Through various theological systems and methods of interpretation, we have fallen prey to the notion that some of the Scriptures are no longer relevant for us personally. They may have been authoritative in days gone by, but they somehow have lost their grip. These parts of Scripture remain valuable as history, but their function in our lives is more akin to an antique—nice to look at, but not really useable.

### *Hermeneutics*

This state of affairs among the believing communities of our day is at least in part the result of various methods of interpreting the Bible. One such method is called Dispensationalism. At the core of this hermeneutic is the axiom that God requires different standards of obedience in different eras or dispensations. What pleases Him in one era may be different in another era. Actually, this same perspective is found quite early in the history of the Church. For example, Justin Martyr (110–165 CE), in his *Dialogue with Trypho*,<sup>2</sup> uses this argument to suggest that since before the giving of the Torah, people pleased God without observing the Sabbath, it is logical to presume that people could do so in a later era when the law had been abolished by the coming of "Christ." This concept remains a pillar of Dispensational theology: one is obligated to obey the commandments given for the current dispensation, but those given in other dispensations do not apply. Thus, it is not uncommon to hear this theological proposition: "only what is found in the New Testament is required of God's people today."

It can be seen that in the Dispensational scheme of things, one's first duty when studying the Scriptures is to discern between what was given to God's people in former dispensations and what is given to His people in the current era. Only when such a distinction is made, can the Bible be rightly interpreted according to the Dispensationalists. Though flatly denied by those who hold this viewpoint, such a belief creates a "canon within a canon" as applied to Scripture. By "canon" we mean "rule," or "standard." The measure of what is right and wrong is determined by the yardstick of Scripture. Yet when one begins with the presupposition that there are multiple "yardsticks," only the "yardstick" for the current era actually functions as canon. In essence, significant parts of the Scriptures are therefore rendered nonessential when dealing with what is righteous and what is not. It is upon this basis that the complete neglect of the Sabbath, festivals, and food laws, etc., can occur without any twinge of conscience. These were "rules" for another era—they don't apply to us.

Yet even though the motivation of those who have developed this hermeneutic was to make the Scriptures applicable and relevant for our times, in reality what has occurred is just the opposite. Once a person comes to believe that parts of the Scripture are no longer directly applicable to one's life, one has subtly undermined the authority of the divine word. One "trembles" only in regard to some of the Bible, but not all of it. And since one can confidently set aside the divine commands which applied only to

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1. m.*Sanhedrin* 10.1.

2. See Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapters xix and xcii.

some other dispensation, one always holds open the possibility that any of the commands of God might not be applicable. For instance, the Church seems entirely unconcerned about the four stipulations given by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), even though they occur in the “New Testament” which is considered the canon of law for the current dispensation. When is the last time you heard a sermon preached about the evils of ingesting blood? On the contrary, the same dispensational principle is applied to Acts: it is considered a “transitional book” that cannot be used as the standard for the modern Church. It applied only to a former era, but not to the present day. My point in this example is simply this: once a person is comfortable with viewing one part of Scripture as non-applicable, it is inevitable and logical that they might be willing just as easily to set aside other Scriptures that seem archaic or irrelevant. As Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” opined, “pull on a thread, and where will it end—where will it end?”

There is another pillar of Dispensational theology that has permeated evangelical Christendom: the need always to keep Israel and the Church distinct as two separate entities. Fuller writes:

...the basic premise of Dispensationalism is two purposes of God expressed in the formation of two peoples who maintain their distinction throughout eternity.<sup>3</sup>

Chafer gives a fuller explanation of this fundamental pillar of Dispensational theology:

The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

We may therefore state that two of the primary pillars of Dispensational theology are: 1) that God requires different standards of righteousness for different dispensations or eras, and 2) that Israel and the Church are always distinct, and that God’s purposes and requirements for each are therefore likewise distinct.

This need to always maintain the distinction of Israel and the Church means that for the dispensationalist, *the halachah given to Israel is distinct from that required of the Church*. It is understandable, therefore, why those who accept dispensationalism would naturally consider the Torah to be something that applies to Israel, but not to the Church. And it is the logical next step to assert that the New Covenant (understood as the “New Testament”) forms the “way of life” for the Church as over against Israel.

But this method of interpretation runs into big trouble when scrutinized under the magnifying glass of biblical exegesis. For starters, the Bible of the Apostles was the Tanach, and they constantly appeal to their Bible as the basis for faith and *halachah*, not only for Israel, but also for the Gentiles who have been grafted in. When Yeshua gave the orders to His disciples to “go, make disciples of all the nations” (Matthew 28:19–20), He instructed them to teach these new disciples “everything that I have commanded you.” The *halachah* given to the disciples of Yeshua was the same *halachah* they were to teach those who would become disciples among the nations. Moreover, Paul repeatedly taught that there was one family of God, not two, and that the Gentiles had joined the “commonwealth of Israel” having been “brought near” by faith in Yeshua (Ephesians 2:11–13). He reveled in the joy of Gentiles being “fellow heirs,” “fellow citizens,” “fellow members of the household of God,” and “fellow partakers of the promise” (Ephesians 2:19; 3:6). How much more explicit could he have been in emphasizing that

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3. Daniel P. Fuller, “The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism” (Doctor’s dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), p. 25.

4. L. S. Chafer, *Dispensationalism* (Dallas: Seminary Press, 1936), p. 107.

Gentiles who have believed do not replace Israel, but join her as the chosen people of God?

However, not only does the old-line Dispensational hermeneutic<sup>5</sup> wilt under the light of thorough exegesis, it also adds to the notion that one must pick and choose from the Scriptures in terms of what is personally applicable and what is not. Not only must the dispensationalist approach Scripture with the question of what is applicable in the current dispensation, they also must separate the Scriptures according to what applies to Israel and what applies to the Church. This can get pretty messy. Take the current issue of abortion, for example. Are the commands given in Exodus 21:22–25 applicable only for Israel? Since the “New Testament” gives no clear commands regarding abortion, is the Church left with no guidelines on the matter? Can a dispensationalist honestly appeal to Exodus 21 when arguing that one who causes the death of an unborn infant is charged with a capital offense? On the other hand, how often is the appeal made to Malachi 3 to convict Church members of their need to give tithes and offerings? On what basis is that text applicable to the current dispensation?

Another debilitating hermeneutic found often in the Christian Church is that of allegorizing or “spiritualizing” the text. In this common method of reading the Scriptures, the obvious and “plain” meaning of the Scriptures is presumed to be less valuable than a “deeper, spiritual” meaning. Usually those who allegorize the sacred text do so on the basis that the meaning pertaining to the “physical” must give way to the deeper “spiritual” sense of the text. Since those who hold to this hermeneutic most often believe that the Church has become the “New Israel,” those laws and statutes given for “physical Israel” are reinterpreted “spiritually” for the “spiritual Israel,” that is, the Church. Thus, those things required of Israel (her pattern of life in this world) are transformed into “matters of the heart,” meaning that Sabbath rest becomes one’s rest of faith; the appointed times become mere history teaching the eternal reign of Messiah; clean and unclean foods do not speak of one’s physical food, but of one’s spiritual diet (believing the truth and rejecting error), and so on.

Using allegory to arrive at the meaning of the sacred text, however, is very arbitrary. Who decides what “deeper spiritual meaning” the text actually possesses? Since there are no clear guidelines for exactly how one is to arrive at the “deeper spiritual meaning,” the allegorical method gives way to a host of individualistic interpretations. One need only read a handful of commentaries using this method to see how far afield each of them goes from the plain meaning of the text.

Moreover, at the foundation of this hermeneutic is the erroneous notion that what is physical is less important than what is non-physical. When God created the physical world, He declared that it was “good,” not bad. And the very fact that God intends to resurrect our bodies shows clearly that He finds eternal value in the physical aspect of our existence. Once again, even though those who utilize an allegorical method of interpretation may have pure motives, their methodology is flawed, and leads to a view of Scripture that is devastating: what the sacred text obviously says is not what it really means.

In the end, it can be seen that when the Scriptures are divided along the lines of “what is applicable and what is not,” they lose their authority. Theologians become the deciding factor rather than the word of God itself. Instead of trembling at the word, convenient theologies and methods of interpretation have made God’s people comfortable with neglecting what God has said. And the younger generation has caught this inconsistency with fervor. The sexual revolution of the 60’s has become a way of life in our society, and it has so entrenched the youth of Christendom that the mores and standards of bygone eras are considered outmoded and irrelevant. Premarital sex is considered normative, and the presence of

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5. I use the term “old-line Dispensationalism” because in recent years, some of the scholars among dispensational schools have forged a new presentation of dispensationalism called “Progressive Dispensationalism,” in which they attempt to answer the nagging questions posed to this hermeneutic by the biblical text itself. Note Craig Blaising and Darrell Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Baker Books, 1993).

unwed mothers has reached epidemic proportions within the Church.<sup>6</sup> Even what Moses and Paul wrote about homosexuality is considered to be in need of “updating” for our current world. Please understand, I applaud those individuals and groups who give of their time, energy, and resources to help those who find themselves engulfed in the woes of unwanted pregnancy, or trapped in the sexual maze of our times, but I continue to wonder how long it will take us to realize that it is the nonchalant approach to God’s word that has caused the demise of morality within the believing community in the first place. Is it possible to return to trembling at God’s word when we have spent so much time building theologies that have made us feel good about neglecting it?

### *Playing Religion*

When the Scriptures become a smorgasbord from which we may select what fits our fancy, we have entered the burgeoning world of playing religion. Paul speaks of this when, in 2Timothy 3, he gives us one of his longest lists of vices characterizing the faithless, a list that includes “holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power” (3:5). What does it mean to “hold to a form of godliness?” It means that there is outward show (μόρφωσις, *morphosis*) of religion. One cannot help but collate Paul’s words here with those of Yeshua in Matthew 7:22

“Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’”

Indeed, those who protest before the Judge of all the earth are those who have lived a very religious life. Everything they did was in the name of Yeshua. Yet what is the Master’s response?

“And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matthew 7:23).

This is actually a quote from Psalm 6:8[9]. David cries out, “Depart from me all you workers of iniquity (ἡμαρτία, *’aven*).” The Gospel account is given to us in Greek, and in this case, the quote from Psalm 6 is from the Lxx. The word “iniquity” from the Psalm is translated by the Lxx with the word “lawlessness” (ἀνομία, *anomia*), from the Greek word νόμος, *nomos*, usually translated “law” in our English Bibles. It is this word that is most often used in the Lxx to translate “Torah.” When preceded by the Greek *alpha* (used much like our English “un” meaning “not”), *anomos* becomes “no Torah.” These who receive the condemnation of the Master are those who were busy playing religion, but whose lives were characterized by unrighteousness—by a willful neglect and disdain for God’s Torah. If ever there were a text of Scripture that should cause us to tremble, this is certainly one!

Paul says that those who have merely the outward form of godliness have actually denied the power that produces genuine godliness. What is this power? For the Apostle, the power of God is manifested in a life of righteousness which results from the work of the Spirit in the inner man. As an example, note Paul’s heartfelt prayer for the Ephesian believers (Ephesians 3:16–19):

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Messiah may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and

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6. According to one statistic (<http://www.family.org/pregnancy/articles/a0031697.cfm>), one out of every six abortions is performed upon a woman who calls herself a “born again Christian.” That works out to 250,000 abortions a year, and the majority of these are performed on teens 15–18 years old.

grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Messiah which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.

Attempts to conform one's life to the righteous standards of God apart from the empowering work of the Spirit are always doomed to failure. This is because at the core of obedience to God is a willingness to die to one's self, something that is patently contrary to our natural way of thinking. Loving God with all of one's heart leaves no room for self-centeredness, and it is the gracious work of the Spirit in the hearts of God's elect that brings about this death to self (Romans 6:1–11). The power to which Paul refers is the living and abiding presence of the Spirit through Whom the life of the risen Messiah manifests itself through the actions of His people.

This is perfectly illustrated in the lives of Yeshua's disciples as they lived out the truth of the Gospel. In Acts 3, Peter and John were proclaiming the resurrection of Yeshua in the Temple precincts at the *minchah* (the afternoon Temple service), and a man, lame from his birth, was healed. Of course, the Sadducees were upset because many of the people were receiving the message of the Gospel, so they arrested Peter and John and put them in jail. The next day, at the trial, they were asked: "By what power, or in what name, have you done this?" (Acts 4:7). Peter, empowered by the Spirit, gave the answer (vv. 8–10):

Rulers and elders of the people, if we are on trial today for a benefit done to a sick man, as to how this man has been made well, let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Yeshua Messiah the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead—by this name this man stands here before you in good health.

But what really amazed the Temple priests was that Peter and John displayed such authority and power even though they were not among the leading Sages of the day (v. 13):

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Yeshua.

The same power of life and righteousness that had characterized Yeshua as He lived and taught among the people was now evident in the lives of His disciples.

### *Trembling at the Word*

Today many of us find ourselves in a renewed pursuit of the truth. We have come to realize that the power of the Scriptures has been diminished through millennia of theologies and various methods of interpretation. We're simply trying to discover what the Bible (all of it) means and how we are to obey it. We are reading the Bible with new eyes because we're always asking this basic question: "Lord, I want to demonstrate my love for You by obeying this Scripture. Will You show me how?"

This perspective of the Scriptures, I think, is part of what Isaiah is speaking about when He talks of one "trembling" at the word of God. The word "tremble" itself can mean to be afraid, or to shake with fear, but it can also mean to be "anxious," and even to "pursue after something" with a certain heightened expectation. We come to the Scriptures with the anticipation that it contains the very word of God which we have not yet heard nor understood. We handle it as though it is a precious and delicate masterpiece (because it is) and we tremble to think we are privileged to hold it in our hands. Like the violinist who holds a priceless Stradivarius, we lift the Scriptures to our chin and tremble to think what music it will play.

And oh, what music it plays! It reaches to the very bone and marrow, and divides between the thoughts and intents of our heart (Heb 4:12). It brings forth treasures we could have never imagined, and overwhelms our soul with the eternal (Matthew 13:52). When we read it, study it, and meditate upon it, the unchanging wisdom of God inundates us with all the wonder of a divinely composed symphony. We tremble at the magnificence of God Himself, and of His grace, for sharing His thoughts with us. For the Scriptures become to us the living breath of the Almighty, not just ancient words cast in the context of ancient societies and language. It stands fully relevant in our 21st Century, and speaks to us in tones that resonate deeply in our spirits.

Isaiah's words therefore ring in our ears. Trembling at God's word means recognizing that His word is not manageable. It comes to us in the power of the Spirit as an overwhelming call to submission, as something far bigger than we are. It displays the awesome heart of our King, Who has called all of us into covenant relationship with Himself, and Who therefore subdues our puny minds with the grandeur of His omnipotence and eternal wisdom. With humbled hearts we respond to Him, "speak Lord, your servant is listening." And He responds by handing us His revealed word as honeycomb, and kindly says, "eat all of it."