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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

Clarity Is Everything

Titus 1:2

By John L. Wheeler

“in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began” (Titus 1:2 ESV).

Many years ago, I was visiting my Uncle Sam. During our visit, he told me about a bumper sticker he had seen on an automobile. The sticker read, “God said it, I believe it, and that settles it.”

Uncle Sam was livid.

He was not angry because the bumper sticker expressed confidence in the Word of God. He was angry because, in his judgment, it contained three statements when only two were necessary. He objected to the implication that the truth of God's Word was somehow dependent upon the person who believed it.

Sam declared, “God said it, and that settles it.”

I have never forgotten that conversation. What might have seemed to someone else a minor disagreement over the wording of a bumper sticker became a lesson that has remained with me throughout my life. Uncle Sam taught me something profoundly important about the nature of divine truth. God does not require our agreement to establish the truthfulness of His Word. What God has declared is true whether we believe it, question it, misunderstand it, or reject it altogether.

God said it, and that settles it.

That simple declaration rests upon a foundation far greater than the authority of any human teacher, theologian, church council, or confession of faith. It rests upon the character of God Himself.

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Paul describes Him as the God *"who never lies"* (Titus 1:2 ESV). The writer of Hebrews declares that *"it is impossible for God to lie"* (Hebrews 6:18 ESV). These are not merely assurances that God ordinarily tells the truth. They are declarations concerning His very nature. Falsehood is contrary to everything God is. He cannot deceive, misrepresent, or contradict Himself. His Word is true because He is true.

This has enormous implications for the way we approach Holy Scripture.

If God cannot lie, then no genuine contradiction can exist between what He has declared in one passage and what He has declared in another. Difficulties may arise in our understanding. Questions may remain unresolved. We may struggle to determine the meaning of a particular expression or the relationship between two passages. But the difficulty cannot be attributed to falsehood or confusion in God.

The problem is never that God has spoken falsely. The problem lies in our understanding of what He has spoken.

Yet there is an important distinction between acknowledging that some passages of Scripture are difficult and treating every passage as though its meaning were equally uncertain.

Not every statement in Scripture is difficult to understand.

Some declarations are so direct, so deliberate, and so emphatic that their essential meaning confronts the reader immediately. They may have implications that require careful consideration, but their fundamental assertions are unmistakable.

Consider the words of Jesus Christ in John 5:24:

"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24 ESV)

There is extraordinary clarity in this declaration.

Jesus does not say that the believer may someday receive eternal life. He says that the believer *has eternal life*. He does not say that the believer might escape judgment if certain additional conditions are eventually satisfied. He says, *"He does not come into judgment."* And He does not describe the passage from death to life merely as a future possibility. He declares that the believer *"has passed from death to life."*

Three statements. Three affirmations. Each spoken by the Lord Jesus Christ.

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We must, of course, understand these words within their context. The Lord is speaking of those who hear His word and believe the Father who sent Him. His promise is not a declaration that faith is unnecessary, nor is it an invitation to disregard the remainder of Scripture. But neither may we diminish what He has actually declared.

The One who speaks is the eternal Son of God. He cannot lie.

And that should settle something in our minds before we begin constructing explanations of His words.

The same clarity appears in John 10, where Jesus speaks of His sheep:

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand." (John 10:27–28 ESV)

Here the Lord does more than describe the possession of eternal life. He declares the security of those to whom He gives it.

"They will never perish."

Those words are neither tentative nor uncertain. They are a promise from the Good Shepherd concerning His own sheep.

And then He adds that no one will snatch them out of His hand. In the following verse, He speaks of the Father's hand, declaring that no one is able to snatch them from it.

The believer's assurance rests upon the power and faithfulness of the One who gives eternal life, not upon the strength of the sheep to preserve themselves.

Surely, we ought to approach such declarations with reverence. They are not propositions awaiting our approval. They are the words of Christ.

The apostle Paul speaks with similar certainty in the closing verses of Romans 8:

"For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38–39 ESV)

Notice the breadth of Paul's declaration.

He considers death and life. He considers spiritual powers. He considers the present and the future. He considers height and depth. And lest anything be thought omitted, he adds *"nor anything else in all creation."*

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His conclusion is that none of these can separate those who belong to Christ from the love of God in Him.

Paul does not present this as a possibility he hopes will prove true. He declares, *"For I am sure."*

His confidence is grounded in what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ, as the entire eighth chapter of Romans makes abundantly clear.

Here, then, are three remarkable passages of Scripture. In one, Christ declares that the believer has eternal life and has passed from death to life. In another, He declares that His sheep will never perish. In the third, Paul declares that nothing in all creation can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

These statements deserve to be heard before they are explained.

And they must never be explained in such a manner that their declarations are effectively denied.

This brings us to an essential principle of biblical interpretation: Scripture must be permitted to interpret Scripture.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in chapter 1, section 7, acknowledges that not everything in Scripture is equally plain or equally clear to every reader. That is an important admission. There are passages whose interpretation demands prolonged study, careful examination of language and context, and humble recognition of the limitations of human understanding.

The Confession does not suggest that such passages are uninspired, unreliable, or less authoritative than others. Every part of Holy Scripture possesses the authority of the God who inspired it.

But the Confession goes further. In chapter 1, section 9, it declares:

"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly."

That is a principle of enormous importance.

When a passage is difficult to understand, we do not resolve its difficulty by dismissing it. Neither do we permit an uncertain interpretation of that passage to overthrow a clear declaration elsewhere in Scripture. We seek to understand what is difficult in the light of what is clear.

This is not a matter of assigning greater divine authority to one passage than another. The authority is identical because the Author is the same. The difference lies in the degree of clarity with which we understand what has been written.

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A difficult passage remains true even when we do not fully understand it. A clear passage remains true even when its implications challenge what we have previously believed.

And there is where the problem often becomes something more than intellectual.

Every reader of Scripture brings certain assumptions to the text. We have been taught by parents, pastors, teachers, churches, and theological traditions. Much of that instruction may be faithful and valuable. Indeed, we should be grateful for those whom God has used to teach us His Word.

But no teacher is infallible. No theological tradition is beyond correction. No system of doctrine, however carefully constructed, possesses the authority of Holy Scripture itself.

Our theology must be derived from Scripture, examined by Scripture, and corrected by Scripture whenever correction is necessary.

The moment we reverse that relationship, we have made a serious mistake.

When we approach a passage of Scripture with the determination that it cannot possibly mean what its language plainly declares because such a meaning would conflict with our theological convictions, we have ceased to approach the text as students. We have begun to approach it as judges.

And that is a dangerous position for any creature to assume before the Word of his Creator.

There is a difference between asking, “What does this passage mean?” and insisting, “This passage cannot mean what it appears to say because my theology will not permit it.”

The first question reflects a willingness to learn. The second may reveal an unwillingness to be corrected.

It is possible, of course, for sincere Christians to misunderstand Scripture. Even capable and conscientious theologians may disagree about the interpretation of difficult passages. Such disagreement does not necessarily indicate dishonesty, rebellion, or contempt for God's Word. Human understanding is limited, and theological error may arise from sincere but mistaken reasoning.

Yet sincerity does not make an interpretation correct, and the possibility of honest disagreement must never become an excuse for intellectual carelessness.

There is such a thing as theological prejudice. There is such a thing as becoming so attached to a doctrinal position that contrary evidence is resisted before it has been fairly considered.

And there is such a thing as arrogance.

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Arrogance appears when we become more concerned with defending our conclusions than with discovering what God has actually said. It appears when we treat our understanding as though it were incapable of correction. It appears when the clear words of Christ are subjected to explanations whose practical effect is to remove the very assurance He has given.

The question is not whether our theology is important. It certainly is. The question is whether we understand its proper place.

Theology is the servant of divine revelation, not its master.

And that principle applies to every one of us.

It is easy to recognize theological prejudice in someone whose conclusions differ from our own. It is considerably more difficult to recognize the same tendency in ourselves. Yet the obligation to submit to Scripture does not rest upon one theological tradition alone. It rests upon every person who professes to believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God.

We must be willing to ask whether our convictions have been formed by Scripture or whether we have learned to read Scripture through convictions we are unwilling to reconsider.

That is not an invitation to abandon sound doctrine. It is an invitation to ensure that our doctrine is truly sound.

Nor does clarity eliminate the need for careful interpretation. A statement may appear simple when isolated from its context and prove more complex when examined within the whole counsel of God. We must never confuse familiarity with understanding or personal confidence with certainty.

But neither should we manufacture uncertainty where God has spoken plainly.

There is a profound difference between examining the meaning of a declaration and searching for a way to escape its meaning.

When Jesus says that the believer has eternal life, we must listen. When He says that His sheep will never perish, we must listen. When the apostle declares that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, we must listen.

And when Scripture presents something difficult, we must continue listening, seeking to understand it in harmony with everything else God has revealed.

For the God who speaks in one passage is the same God who speaks in every other passage.

He cannot lie.

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I have often thought about that afternoon with Uncle Sam. I cannot remember every conversation we shared over the years, but I have never forgotten his indignation over that bumper sticker or the lesson he taught me.

At the time, he was correcting a sentence printed on the back of an automobile. But the truth behind his correction reached far beyond that bumper sticker.

He was reminding me that the authority of God's Word does not depend upon the approval of those who hear it.

And there is a necessary humility in that recognition.

We do not sit in judgment upon the truthfulness of God. We stand before His Word as those who must hear, understand, believe, and obey.

The Scriptures do not submit to us.

We submit to the Scriptures.

And when the God who cannot lie has spoken clearly, our responsibility is not to find a way around His words but to receive them with faith and reverence.

Uncle Sam understood that.

“God said it, and that settles it.”

Clarity is everything—not because we understand everything, but because what God has clearly revealed must govern what we have not yet understood.

Just a thought.

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