

Winking at the Word

by Tim Hegg

©2004 Torahresource.com

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 (Is 66:2)

The obvious reference, in the first place, is to the Aaronic Benediction of the High Priest over Israel (Num 6:22-27), in which the 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: “But to this one I will look.”

God is looking to bless those who are “humble and contrite of spirit,” but this description is not primarily one of psychology but of faithfulness 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. God’s blessing comes upon the person who “trembles” at God’s word. The only other time in Scripture that we find the Hebrew word *תָּרַח* (the word translated “tremble”) construed with the preposition *עַל* (as it is in Is 66:2), is 1Sam 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. This gives us a sense of what Isaiah means. His description of the one who is “humble and contrite of spirit” is that such a person is fully concerned that God’s word be received for what it is, and accepted with a submissive heart of obedience. 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.

There’s a problem with familiarity—it tends to breed complacency. We have the Bible in some many formats today, that it has the possibility of becoming common. Whether in the many book forms available, or on our computer screen, or carried along with us on our Palm Pilot, the Bible has become as familiar to us as any literature. That, of course, is commendable, even wonderful. Yet when the Scriptures become to us just another piece of jewelry in a whole box of jewels, it is possible that they might lose their supreme value in our minds.

There’s another aspect of familiarity, however, that is even more devastating—tradition. All too often, we have so wrapped our traditional understanding of the Scriptures around the sacred text, that we have relegated the eternal words of the Almighty to a ho-hum collection of things we already know. We find it impossible to listen to the Bible as though it is the first time we read it. We can “speed read” because we know the story all too well, and we already know what it means. Our comfortable security within well formed decades of theology have galvanized the words of Scripture into a familiar sculpture cast in bronze. We no longer have to “think” when we read, because we already know what it says.

I experienced this personally some years ago when a very dear friend of mine sat in my living room after a wonderful meal prepared by my wife. Sitting with friends, conversing about the Scriptures, is a highlight for me. But this time it was upsetting! Rob had years ago finished his doctoral work at Aberdeen in Scotland, and I even had a copy of his dissertation (though I’d never read it). In the course of our conversation, the issue of the “New Covenant” in Jeremiah 31 became our topic of discussion.

Rob had the “audacity” to suggest that the New Covenant was not yet completed (a main point in his dissertation). “What,” I exclaimed? “Do you mean to tell me that you honestly believe the New Covenant still awaits its fulfillment?” That was incredulous to me. My whole theological perspective was built on the axiom that the “Old Covenant” had been abolished, and the “New Covenant” had taken its place. When I expressed this to Rob, he agreed that for many the “Old Covenant” had been abolished, but he remained steadfast in the position that the “New Covenant” had not yet been completed. He explained what he understood by the term “Old Covenant” (found only in 2Cor 3), and I was even more incensed. The conversation continued with good dialog, but I was troubled. I remember telling my wife after our friends had left, that Rob’s theology was something out in space! It just went contrary to everything I had ever believed. It didn’t fit into the neatly packaged system I had been taught. What is more, I was sure he was wrong, and I set out to prove it.

The next day I went to my library and pulled Rob’s dissertation off of the shelf. I began to wade through the detailed study and exegesis of text after text, and as I did, I became more and more concerned. Not only was I sensing that Rob was right, I realized that I had never studied these texts of Scripture for myself—I had simply accepted the well-worn path of explanation given to me by my teachers. I felt embarrassed, humiliated, and foolish. There I sat with two Master’s degrees in theology, and I was being told that I was wrong. Inconceivable!

That, of course, was a crossroads in my life. I had suddenly realized that even in my best efforts, the word of God had been venerated with a theology of tradition. I knew that what I genuinely wanted was “furniture” built out of solid wood—no veneer. I determined right then and there to start over, re-reading the Scriptures with a new purpose—to find out what it said regardless of what I currently believed. That path of study has been on-going for many years now, and hopefully it is still continuing. I admit that often I am surprised when I study and read the sacred text. At times God reveals Himself to me as a stranger, because He acts and speaks in ways I had never before imagined. And sometimes I get a brand new picture of myself, because before I was afraid to put my own thoughts up against the unflinching standard of His, and when I do, I’m compelled to change. Though I have become more and more familiar with the sacred text, my study and reading of it has taken on the character of a journey, not always sure what I’ll find around the next bend in the road. As a result, I’m always looking for what I’ve never seen before.

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 (Matt 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.

But there is an insidious theological error that, like a virus first unsuspected, but later brings death, has been infecting God’s people since time began. It is first seen in the enemy’s approach to Chavah: “has God said?” This disease is far more subtle, however, than an open challenge of God’s truthfulness. It comes as an unseen microbe that spreads its devastation. The theological disease I’m talking about is the theological perspective that God’s word, or at least parts of God’s word, becomes practically

irrelevant over time and culture. Of course, no one who claims to believe in the eternal nature of the Scriptures would ever admit that parts of the Bible are irrelevant. That would be considered heresy. But in practical measures, when someone says “This part of the Bible, or this particular passage, does not apply to me, but is applicable only for others,” then in essence that part of the Bible is irrelevant, and discarded. The argument for such a perspective usually goes this way: some Scriptures are directed to women, others to men, some to kings, some to priests, and so on. So then the Bible is read with this in mind: “which parts are for me, and which are not?” That sounds very logical, but it is deceptive. For instance, as a man, the laws directed toward women are still very relevant for me, because there are women in my family and in my community. As one who is to love my neighbor as myself, I must understand what these scriptures teach me about women, and how I am to serve and minister to them within the context of God’s covenant. The same would be true if I were living in a community that had a king: the Scriptures directed particularly to him would still have high significance for me.

But if some of God’s holy word is considered time-bound, that it had application to the ancient people of God, but no longer is relevant to God’s modern-day people, then those parts of Scripture are viewed much like an antique—beautiful to look at, and even valuable to own, but never really used. I recently saw an early model Underwood typewriter selling for \$95. I’m sure some collector eagerly snapped up this rare antique. But I’m equally sure that he would not use it for his daily office work. And as soon as we take some of God’s word to be a nicely preserved antique, we have just undermined the eternal authority of the Scriptures. God’s word—all of it—is alive and active. It is never outmoded. It remains, throughout the generations, as the cutting edge technology for life and faith.

But the real rub comes when we are taught that some Scriptures are only for Jews or the physical descendants of Jacob. Not only is this never stated in the Bible itself, but it unwittingly undermines the authority of all the Scriptures as well. If God, for instance, gives Israel a “Jewish Biblical life” which is not applicable to non-Jews, then it becomes the duty of Jew and non-Jew alike to dissect the Scriptures to see what is relevant and what is not. That means we read the Bible in a totally different way, not as trembling at God’s word, but picking off leaves of the divine clover in a kind of “that’s for me, that’s not for me” exercise.

Moreover, such a theological bankrupt approach leaves one in a hopeless tangle. Take the Ten Words, for instance: are all Ten applicable for everyone, or is the Sabbath just for the Jews? And if one concludes that all Ten are for everyone, then in what way is the weekly Sabbath universally applicable, but the Sabbaths of the *moe’dim* are only for the descendants of Jacob? There seems to be no criteria for making such decisions, and in the end, deciding what one should do or not do is left to the flip-flopping thoughts of rationalization. That’s why the church has slid down the slippery slope of immorality. The Scriptures that call us to the high moral path have been viewed as hardly relevant for our times. AFTER all, if we teach that some of God’s commands have been set aside, what prohibits us from viewing other commands as outmoded and not applicable to our modern situation. Though we would never succumb to the lie of the enemy, in questioning “has God said?”, we practically relegate God’s word as irrelevant: “God has said it, but it doesn’t matter any more” or “it’s not for me.”

This disastrous approach to Scripture yields yet another grave problem: who is a disciple of Yeshua and who is not? The words of our Master in Matthew 5:17–20 would strongly indicate that He desires all of His disciples to be “great in the kingdom.” Yet according to His criteria, being reckoned by the Father as great in the kingdom requires attention to even the smallest stroke of the Torah and Prophets! Can all of Yeshua’s disciples strive to be great in the kingdom, or only some of them? Furthermore, Yeshua commanded His emissaries to teach the nations all He had commanded them (Matt 28:19–20). Does that “all” include the smallest stroke of the Torah and Prophets or not? Were the Apostles of our Master suppose to give the whole story to the nations, or just part of it?

That this “dissecting” approach to Scripture has undermined the authority of God’s word is obvious even within congregations and communities who proclaim to love the Torah. Some of the Messianic leaders who so strongly want to protect the “Jewish Biblical life” from the non-Jews for fear that their own Jewish identity might be compromised, hypocritically disregard the “Jewish Biblical life”

themselves. They buy and sell on the Sabbath, they regularly eat prohibited foods, they diminish the *moe'dim*, they rarely wear *tzitzit*, and they regularly engage in *lashon hara*. They don't tremble at God's word—they manage God's word. They dole it out like cards in a poker game, always stacking the deck to make sure the “right” people get the aces. No wonder many non-Jews are “leaving the game” or creating their own deck of cards.

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.”