

“He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself”

1. Jesus Looks into the Mirror.

One of the most remarkable and formative bible studies ever experienced was that which Jesus gave to two of his disciples as they were walking along the Emmaus road on the afternoon of his resurrection (Lk 23:13ff.). It was remarkable because the resurrected Jesus was the expositor. It was given in a purely extempore manner, with no books or scrolls, coming out of a mind utterly stocked with scripture, and he spoke in power through the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:2). It was formative because it was utterly pertinent to the perplexities of the two who heard it, so much so that they seemed never to have even asked the unknown stranger who talked to them whom he was or where he came from. The focus of it was in fact entirely on his recent death and his reported resurrection. It was the first coherent and comprehensive account from the scriptures ever given as to the reason and purpose of his death and the need of his resurrection (though Jesus had hinted at the nature of his death and resurrection before it happened). It was, therefore, a study and a revelation of immense importance, one on which the whole gospel was destined to be based. Finally, and most significantly for our purposes, it was a study that was expounded totally from the Old Testament.

It was not, of course, the only Old Testament bible study that Jesus gave after his resurrection. That very same evening of the resurrection day in the Upper Room he appeared to the disciples and once again showed them everything that had been written about him in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Again he taught them the need for his death and his resurrection, but on this occasion he added a whole new panorama of teaching in which he showed them from the same scriptures a future preaching programme about repentance and forgiveness of sins that was to involve all nations (Lk. 24:45-47).

When we consider that this was only the first day of his resurrection, and that he appeared to the disciples over a period of forty days, teaching them a great deal more about the “kingdom”, we can only begin to imagine how much of the Old Testament prophetic scriptures he caused to fall into place in their minds. This teaching truly was the basis of the fundamental truths proclaimed in the early church, and later collected in the shape of the new Testament.

For us to go, then, to the Old Testament and to explore there the same teaching Jesus gave his disciples about his birth, life death resurrection and world purposes is to go back to those heart burning studies of the early resurrection days. It is an invitation hardly to be missed! All the same, some might feel that, since all that insight has now been incorporated into the New Testament, there may be little point in such a laborious examination of the Old Testament. At least four very good reasons suggest themselves for correcting this idea.

“The first coherent and comprehensive account ever given from the Scriptures for the reason and purpose of his death and resurrection”

2. Clarity from the Old Testament.

The first is that the Old Testament still brings much extra clarity to our understanding of Jesus, notwithstanding all that is presented in the New. Unfortunately most people do not associate clarity with the Old Testament. Rather the reverse. Yet there was obviously no obscurity for the disciples as they were taken by Jesus through the Old Testament scriptures, only tremendous light. They could claim no real schooling like the priest or Pharisee, but what they were told made tremendous sense. The reality is that there is in the Old Testament a tremendous foundation for understanding about Jesus (even if we do need a guide and the Holy Spirit!), and we need to avail ourselves of it. Imagery, symbol and picture, as well as simple statement, all contribute to this foundation.

To take an example; the New Testament teaching about the death of Jesus will tell us very clearly that “he became sin for us”, or that “Christ died for the ungodly”. It will tell us he was made an “offering” for us. However, this sort of language and this sort of concept will be really comprehended only when we look at the whole pattern of Old Testament sacrifice as it was recorded in the Tabernacle (later the Temple). John the Baptist may have cried out that Jesus was the “Lamb of God who takes away sin”, but the lamb sacrificed for sin could only be properly understood by what went on in the temple (facts which John’s hearers would know only too well). It was the sin offering in the Temple that provided the full picture of what Jesus was doing when he hung on the cross. It is impossible to understand fully the cross without looking carefully at the Old Testament sin offering. Like the lamb in the temple he carried our sin, his blood was spilt, he was “burned outside the camp” (the agony on Golgotha). Not only was he a sin offering as he hung on the cross, he also represented there all the other different offerings that we see in the temple, and only as we see him fulfilling them can we fully grasp everything of what he was doing. There can be little doubt that Jesus would have expounded

his death in relation to the temple sacrifices, and, as he did so, the disciples would have been overwhelmed by the clarity with which they could now appreciate the need for his death. They would have made a very rapid connection, probably wondering why they had never seen it before! They learned very quickly that God had in fact given such a sacrificial system to Moses, and instructed him to adhere precisely to the pattern simply because it provided an educational foundation for the sacrifice of his Son. Such a survey, however slight, is hugely enriching. Old Testament teaching burned the truth of Jesus’ sacrificial death on the minds and hearts of his disciples.

“Old Testament teaching burned the truth of Christ’s sacrificial death on the hearts of the disciples”

The death of Christ is not simply to be found in the Temple sacrifices. The great prophetic statement in Isaiah 52:13-53 has no equal when it comes to speaking of the nature of Christ's death and the reason for it. There is clarity of statement here that is unsurpassed. There is here, moreover one of the clearest predictions of his resurrection (Is.53: 10-11). Many other images, "types" and statements could be added to the list.

However, as we have seen, Jesus was not only pointing to a clarification of his death when he taught his disciples after the resurrection. He wanted to involve them in his purposes for the future. He had died to redeem people from all nations, and a world. The majesty of these purposes can frequently elude us, but it is impossible to read the Servant songs of Isaiah and not be taken up into such enlarged vision. The Psalms also particularly add to the grandeur of that vision.

3. The Prophetic Power of the Old Testament

There can be little doubt that one of the things that made the hearts of those two disciples on the Emmaus road "burn" was the fact that everything that had happened to Jesus at the cross, and was to happen after the cross, had been so clearly foretold in scripture. It was all a very startling fulfilment of prophecy. Though Jesus justly began his Emmaus Road study with the rebuke, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!" (Lk. 24:25), he left those two disciples with a totally new grasp on the whole issue of prophecy, its accuracy and its power. They could see with him that "the Christ *had* to suffer these things and enter his glory" (Lk. 24:26), because God had ordained it so, and spoken it through his prophets. They were face to face with the fact that God had spoken about what he was going to do, and then had actually done it. If there is anything that can make us come to life as we study the prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament, it is that God really is a speaking God, a God of revelation and that what he speaks and reveals really does happen.

We need to understand this great truth about prophecy. It is fundamental to growth in faith. Amos speaks about it very succinctly: "Surely the Sovereign LORD does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). For Amos it was not even the case that prophecy comes true. It was rather that God would not act in major ways without first giving prophetic notice of it before hand. It was part of the express purpose of God that our faith in him should be stimulated by fulfilled prophecy (see later chapters of Isaiah e.g. Is 48:3 ff). Therefore he spoke prophetically through the Old Testament scriptures about the death, resurrection and world-wide proclamation of Jesus so that when those events came to pass we should be assured of Him and his promises. Not to appreciate the nature and power of the prophetic word is to be robbed of an extraordinary dimension which is both heart burning and motivating.

Such prophetic utterances give broad outlines, but what detail there is can be astonishing. Isaiah 53:9, for example, gives a precise statement about Jesus, the Servant, being "assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death". We see the fulfillment of this statement when we see Jesus dying between two thieves, yet buried in a rich man's tomb! So we are left to meditate on Peter's words, "prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21)

"Prophecy is an extraordinary dimension that is both heart burning and motivating"

"As he grew up he immersed himself in all the Old Testament books"

4. The Impact of the Old Testament on Jesus

Listening to Jesus expound the scriptures concerning himself, the disciples would have seen not only his depth of perception, but also how crucial that perception had been for his own personal life and walk with his Father. When someone expounds the scriptures as Jesus did that day, it is almost always because the person has had to live by them. He was sharing with the disciples his own discoveries about himself and his work, discoveries he made as he grew up and immersed himself in the Old Testament books. He must have become acutely aware, for example, of the meaning of Isaiah's "Servant Songs", and that he actually was the "Servant" portrayed there. In particular, as he read through Isaiah 53 he would have become aware of the horrific death that lay in front of him, and the call to become a "guilt offering" for sin. This helps us to appreciate more deeply the depth of his embracing that call to die for sin. In similar manner the Holy Spirit would have revealed to him his kingly stature as he read both Isaiah and the Psalms, and would have made very clear to him that the nature of his kingship would be one of love, righteousness and justice. Even his earthly ministry as the anointed one preaching to the poor and releasing the captive would have become plain to him as he read through the same books, and especially Isaiah 61. The anointing that he received at the Jordan was not something that took him by surprise – he asked for it because he knew it must come to enable him to fulfil what his Father had called him to in preaching and healing.

There can be few things as rewarding or edifying as seeking to understand the nature of Jesus' own ministry and how he came to understand it. We can come to grips with that when we follow Jesus into the pages of the Old Testament, and learn how powerfully and personally they influenced him

5. The Old is the Essential Foundation of the New

What has been said so far will indicate that when the apostles began their proclamation and teaching about Jesus at Pentecost, they taught what they had heard from Jesus, and consequently their teaching was full of Old Testament allusion and "proof". Thus what we read in the New is fundamentally an interpretation of the Old. Again, there is nothing more edifying than seeing how the tree of the New grew out of the roots of the Old. We can understand fully why the gospel comes to us so rich and so cogently, and why it lines up with the Old Testament. We are left with the assurance that only the extraordinarily interpretive mind of Jesus could have given the Christian faith the start that it had. Seeing all this is a final compelling reason for going into the Old Testament to see Jesus.

An open bible, a listening ear to those who have already sought to explore this path, and the Holy Spirit are our essential aids for this task