

WAY TO SHILOH

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The Key to the Bible

The Bible is a book of great diversity. Its two main divisions differ from each other in very many respects, and they are also separated from each other by a great historic gap. And yet these two separate parts fit, one into the other, in such a way as to make the Bible a living book with a single message. The whole book gathers around one central figure. The Old Testament is a preparation for Him. The New Testament is a revelation of Him. The key to the bible is the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Look first at the Old Testament. It starts with the beginning of things, but it seems to end in an unfinished condition. It leads us from the creation of the world by a continuous way through the stories of the patriarchs, down through the history of the chosen people, on through Psalms and prophecies, till the road at last breaks off and disappears. If there were nothing more in the bible we should be left at the end of the Old Testament wondering what it all meant and where it was leading us.

There are three great highways by which we may travel through the Old Testament, and each of them ends in this unfinished way, leaving us apparently in the dark.

Promise and Prophecy

First there is the highway of promise and prophecy. At the very beginning before Adam and Eve are driven from the Garden of Eden, the announcement is made that the seed of the woman shall bruise the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15). It is a promise that someone will rise among men who shall destroy the power of Satan and deliver the race from the tragedy of the fall.

This promise runs on through the Old Testament, deepening and widening as it goes. It is handed down through the age of the patriarchs. Abraham is told that in his seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 22:18). The promise is repeated to Isaac (Genesis 26:4) and to Jacob (Genesis 28:14). Before the book of Genesis ends, it settles upon the tribe of Judah. Jacob, in blessing his sons, declares that the sceptre shall not depart from Judah till Shiloh or the promised deliverer, come (Genesis 49:10). On through the history of Israel this promise of a Coming One goes, till it centres at last in the family of David. "I will set up thy seed after thee," declares the Lord to David, "and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever" (2 Samuel 7:12,13).

The prophets then take up this promise regarding David's son and expand it into the glorious picture of the Messianic King. "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God,

The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David.” (Isaiah 9:6,7). Other features are added to the picture. The Coming One is not only to be a glorious king; he is to be a lowly sufferer as well. His visage will be marred more than any man and his form more than the sons of men. He is to be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53). The other prophets carry the promise on, adding to the picture a trait here and a trait there; till we reach the end of the Old Testament. But the Coming one has not appeared. We arrive at the end of the road and there is no fulfilment of the prophecy.

Ceremony and Ritual

We go back to the beginning of the book again and find another highway which runs through the Old Testament, the highway of ceremony and ritual. In the fourth chapter of Genesis we read of Abel offering in sacrifice to God the lives of members of his flock. From this time on the ceremony of blood sacrifice, animal victims offered in worship to God, appears again and again throughout the whole Old Testament. When Noah comes out upon a new world after the flood, his first act is to build an altar and offer a sacrifice thereon (Genesis 8:20). When Abraham entered the land of promise and moved up and down in it, he builds an altar wherever he pitches his tent (Genesis 12:8, 13:18).

In the midst of the inhabitants of the land he is bearing witness to the Lord God whose call he has obeyed by these altars of sacrifice. In the book of Exodus the children of Israel are brought out of the land of Egypt under the sprinkled blood of a slain lamb. Then at mount Sinai this ceremony is expanded into a whole system of sacrifices and offerings. A tabernacle is prepared and erected in which these sacrifices are henceforth to be offered, and a whole tribe is set apart to minister in connection with it. The strange ceremony of offering the life of a victim in worship to God has been developed into an elaborate ritual, and yet there is no explanation of its meaning.

And so it goes on through the history of the nation. Samuel offers a sacrifice when he leads the people back to God at Mizpah (1 Samuel 7:9,10). The temple at length takes the place of the tabernacle, and still these ceremonies continue. Solomon offered hecatombs at the dedication (1 Kings 8:62,63). Daily in the temple courts sacrifice is offered. This line of blood runs through the heart of all the worship in tabernacle and temple alike.

While sacrifice was the only way of approach to God in Old Testament days, yet the devout worshipper knew that it was not the sacrifice or the blood in itself which God wanted. “Sacrifice and offering Thou didst not desire” (Psalm 40:6). “Will I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” (Psalm 50:13). There was some other reason for all these ceremonies, some deeper significance in this ritual of blood, but the Old Testament comes to a close without any explanation.

Aspiration and Longing

There is still a third highway that we can follow through the whole Old Testament, a line of aspiration and longing. It begins very early. Soon after the banishment from the Garden of Eden, in the days of Seth when the race has only begun to develop in the earth, we read, “then began men to call upon the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26). Even as early as that it is found that the world cannot satisfy the desires of the human heart. Abraham sets out from his early home in response to a divine call that appealed to a longing in his heart. He is looking for the city that hath foundations whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10). Jacob reveals this longing too, in the struggle at Peniel when he clings to his heavenly antagonist, saying, “I will not let thee go except thou bless me” (Genesis 32:26). At the end of his life, when he is pronouncing his final blessing on his sons one by one, he pauses in the midst of it all, as though weary with the world, and utters this cry, “I have waited for thy salvation, O Lord” (Genesis 49:18).

This longing breaks out most fully in the book of Job. The whole book is a cry for God out of the darkness of suffering. “O that I knew where I might find him!” (Job 23:3). The Psalmist gives utterance to the same longing again and again. “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God” (Psalm 42:1). On through the prophets this line can be traced, for we find them basing some of their most eloquent appeals on the deep longings of the human heart, as when Isaiah cries, “Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” (Isaiah 55:1). But again the Old Testament ends and these aspirations are still unsatisfied.

And so the book leaves us there at the end of its first main part facing a great gap with prophecies still unfulfilled, with ceremonies still unexplained, and with desires of the heart still unrealised. All the roads by which we have come seem to end in the dark.

New Light

But the moment we pass on into the New Testament light begins to break. On the very first page we read the words, "That it might be fulfilled" (Matthew 1:22). A babe comes into the world in Bethlehem, born of a virgin, and the words of the prophets begin to come to pass. As we read on, the figure of Jesus Christ rises up out of the pages of the gospels, growing up in a poor and humble home, as a root out of a dry ground". He comes out of his obscurity at Nazareth, begins His public ministry, teaching and healing and going about doing good, and prophecy is seen unfolding about Him as a flower unfolds to the rising sun.

John the Baptist sends from his prison to ask Jesus if He really is the Coming One. John had already proclaimed Him as such at the Jordan, but now as he lies in prison, his faith begins to falter. He is the last of the long line of the old prophets, and the message Jesus sends back to comfort him is simply this, that in the things Jesus is doing the words of the prophets are being fulfilled (Matthew 11:2-5). Here then we find the first of the long roads that run through the Old Testament taken up and carried on in the New. In the wondrous life of Jesus of Nazareth, the promises and prophecies are finding their fulfilment.

The second road also reappears in the New Testament. There comes a time in the life of Jesus when he tells His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem to suffer and be put to death. The disciples seek to dissuade Him from this purpose, but he will not be turned aside. He steadfastly sets his face to go to Jerusalem. In the upper room there He gathers His disciples about him for the last supper and institutes the ordinance that is to commemorate His death. It is the sealing of the new covenant "This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). Then he goes out to Gethsemane and on to Calvary. And when He dies, the veil that hides the innermost sanctuary in the temple is rent in twain. The ceremonies of that temple are at last explained. The long line of sacrifice that runs through the Old Testament is ended in the sacrifice of Jesus, for "the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." The sin of the world that has barred the way to God is now removed.

And what about the unsatisfied longings of the Old Testament? During His ministry Jesus appealed to the yearnings of men and claimed to be able to satisfy them. In Galilee He looked out upon the weary, toiling multitudes and said, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). In Jerusalem He stood in the temple courts at the feast of the tabernacles and cried, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me and let him drink" (John 7:37). But the meaning of these invitations was not understood till after His death. When He rises from the dead and ascends into heaven as the living and glorified Lord, and then sends His Holy Spirit back into the hearts of His disciples, the full significance of these great words is realised by them. Their lives are flooded with a wealth of joy and blessing they have never known before. In the living and ascended Christ the human heart has at last found its true rest and satisfaction. The New Testament from this point on simply unfolds the blessings of this great fact, and shows that the crucified and risen Saviour fully meets the unsatisfied yearnings of the human heart in all ages.

Christ, therefore, is the key to all the Bible. He is its central Figure. It all speaks of him who is at once our Prophet, our Priest and our King. We can hear his voice in the Old Testament if we read it in the light of the New. The New Testament has a richer meaning when we read it as the completion and the fulfilment of the Old. It is when we see Christ in this way in all the scriptures that the Bible becomes to us the living voice of the living God.

As we read the Bible day by day we should cultivate the habit of listening for the voice of God in it. We should not read it hurriedly but with a quiet reverence, giving it time to speak home to our hearts for "the secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant" (Psalm 25:14).

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*This article was reproduced from a tract by Gladys Eileen Maclean
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