

Message No: AR146
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: The Lord Jesus Christ
Subsection: Truly Strong
Date preached: 21 Aug 94
Date edited: 5 Mar 09 (revised Aug 14)

MESSAGE 7

GOD'S PREFERRED WAY OF COMMUNICATION AND WORKING: TRAINING US TO BE TRULY STRONG

In this message, I would like to consider with you this proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

God's preferred way of communication – promotes our understanding and participation

In what I termed "God's preferred way of communication", we would not be hearing God's voice telling us to do this or that. In fact, we may sometimes not be conscious that He is speaking to us, or we may not be very clear what He is actually trying to communicate to us. Yet we shall see that this is generally God's preferred way of communicating and working in our lives.

This way of communication may take place, for example, when we are reading the Scriptures. As we read prayerfully, the Spirit of God may impress upon our hearts certain truths and principles. He grants us spiritual insight into these truths and principles, and helps us develop stronger convictions. He draws our attention to areas that we need to work on. He helps us make better decisions based on truths and principles we have learned. And all the while, we may not be very conscious that the Spirit of God has been helping us.

This can happen during times of prayer too. When we pray, the Lord may guide us in the direction of our prayer and may draw our attention to areas that we need to concentrate on.

And when we seek the Lord in decision-making, He may help us think through the matter at hand, impressing upon us the relevant issues and principles to consider so that we can make a wise decision.

At times we may not be very clear what the Lord's will is in a particular matter, or how He is actually guiding us. And we may wish for more definite guidance, thinking it would be more desirable and a mark of spirituality. But is this necessarily so? Is it better for us to hear a voice, or for the Lord to make very clear His instructions to us and let us know exactly what we should do?

An important point to note regarding the way the Lord communicates with us is that He wants us to grow in fellowship with Him and learn to perceive the meaning of situations and what actually is taking place, beyond the obvious. He wants us to learn how to view things from His perspective, which we can do only with His help.

In the Scriptures, God has revealed the major concerns of His heart: How His purposes are to be fulfilled; how church life is to be worked out; and how we can grow and develop spiritually. But we need spiritual perception to be able to understand these truths and principles and how they are to be applied.

As far as I can understand it, *God's general approach in communication is not dramatic and this is God's preferred way of communication today, especially to those who have access to the Scriptures.* I have three reasons for saying this.

1. The danger and complications in dramatic forms of communication

There is danger when communication comes in dramatic forms. For example, if we hear a voice, we may not know whether it is of the Lord or an impersonation by the evil one. It is easy for the evil one to deceive those who rely on this form of communication from the Lord. If we unknowingly act on the instructions of the evil one, thinking they are the Lord's, we may end up doing things very detrimental to the Lord's work. We may also come under spiritual bondage to the evil one, and seriously damage our own lives.

2. God has given us the Scriptures

The Scriptures is the primary source for knowledge of God's revelation of truth – to teach and train God's children so that we may be adequate and equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

The Scriptures is a unique book. It is the only book with content and teaching that we can wholeheartedly receive, absorb into our hearts and live by – because it is inspired by God for this purpose. The authority of the Scriptures rests on the authority of God. We submit to its teaching because we submit to God.

The Scriptures is the main source of clear, reliable revelation of who God is and what He desires to communicate to us. Although God can speak to us and communicate the truth to us directly, it is through the Scriptures that He reveals to us an inexhaustible wealth of knowledge, and this includes:

- Who God is – His attributes, character and ways
- Why God created man, His intentions for man, and what He requires of man
- What has been in God's heart concerning the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes
- The plight of man and God's salvation plan for us in Christ
- Spiritual warfare and how to fight the good fight of faith
- The importance of man's moral and spiritual stature
- God's provision of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the Scriptures
- The role of the church and how church life ought to be worked out
- The kingdom of God
- Moral and spiritual principles that can help us fare well in this fallen world and bear fruit in every good work

All the wealth of knowledge and spiritual understanding that God wants to reveal to us is not revealed to us directly, but through the Scriptures.

Moreover, whatever we think God is revealing to us directly needs to be examined in the light of what the Scriptures teaches, so that we may ascertain its authenticity – that God has indeed spoken to us, and that it is not a thought or idea of our own or from the evil one.

One major reason God has given us the Scriptures is to provide us with an objective basis for knowing the truth. Those who live their lives on the basis of what the Scriptures teaches are better equipped to guard themselves from being deceived by the evil one, by wrong teaching, and by the vulnerability of the human heart and mind.

At the heart of scriptural revelation of truth is the revelation of who God is and how we can know Him, relate deeply with Him, walk with Him and serve Him. It is therefore important that we seek to gain insight into the truth revealed in the Scriptures, absorb it, and live it out. What is equally important is that we learn how to interpret and apply the Scriptures correctly and wholesomely.

3. The less dramatic forms of communication require greater participation and more understanding on our part

When God does not speak to us clearly and directly, then if we want to do His will, we will have to look to Him as we ponder and consider what is taking place. When He does not tell us exactly what to do or say, we would be "forced" to try to understand His ways and what He may want us to do or say based on our understanding of spiritual principles. This can then promote our fellowship with God, our spiritual development and the renewal of our minds, all of which are at the heart of God's concern for us. God is concerned about our relationship with Him and that we grow in true strength and maturity.

Compared to the more dramatic kinds of communication, the less dramatic kinds have more reliable safeguards against deception and subjectivity.

For example, we may prayerfully consider a particular matter before the Lord, looking at the relevant factors and issues. As we do so, we may sense the Lord impressing upon us to take a certain course of action. We may then share with others, saying, "As I prayerfully consider this matter before the Lord, this seems to be the decision I ought to make, and here are the reasons I think the Lord is impressing upon me to make this decision." There is a basis for our decision, and as we share it with others, the matter can be discussed and considered together.

Likewise, as we read through the Scriptures, we may be impressed with certain truths and principles, and think the Lord is using these to lead us towards a certain course of action. These truths and principles and their applications can be examined and discussed. The fact that we are not certain it is the Lord speaking to us and guiding us to make the decision in this way can be an advantage. We are less likely to be dogmatic or to categorically say, "This is it." Instead, we are more likely to be open and say, "Though I understand it this way, it is not very clear to me." And because it is not very clear to us, we are more likely to seek for a clearer understanding on whether the Lord is really guiding us towards that course of action.

There are those who confidently say, "God spoke to me, even though I may not be able to tell you how." Or, they may just say, "God clearly impressed upon me that I am to go to Africa." Or, "God told me to get married to this young man." They make bold assertions, but it is difficult to examine the validity of their assertions. In such a situation, it can be very difficult to discuss whether what they have received is indeed of the Lord or is a deception.

There have been instances when sisters-in-Christ sought my counsel because some brothers-in-Christ had told them, "God told me you are to be married to me." Without further information, it can be very difficult for these sisters to consider whether it is indeed the Lord's will for them to get married to these brothers. At the same time, they can also be disturbed because they fear that by rejecting these brothers' approaches, they could be disobeying God.

It can be difficult to discuss whether such things are really of the Lord or are deceptions. Nevertheless, it is still possible to try to understand what actually is taking place. We can ask how the person has come to such a conclusion, and what the surrounding circumstances are. These can indicate to us whether the assertions are really of the Lord or, quite clearly, deception or subjectivity, or the person's own desires. When we are not clear that something is of the Lord, it is important that we do not rashly act upon it. If there is no clear basis for the claims, we should not simply go along with what the other person says.

I now want to go on to another aspect, which is to highlight a major difference in the way God communicates the truth through His servants in the Old Testament and in the

New Testament. There are indications in the Scriptures that there is indeed such a difference, and its implications are relevant to what we are considering.

How God communicated to and through His servants as seen in the Old Testament

A significant proportion of God's revelation, instructions, exhortations and warnings in the Old Testament consists of clear, direct communication to and through His servants. Very often, God's spokesmen prefaced their warnings and exhortations with the words: "Thus says the Lord".

God spoke to the prophets very clearly. Sometimes, these words were intended just for the prophets. At other times, they were meant for the people. And the prophets repeated the words of the Lord. These were not the prophets' own words. In fact, the prophets at times might not have fully appreciated or understood the meaning of the words they uttered.

Let us look at some examples.

Instructions through Moses

The detailed instructions concerning the Law and the building of the tabernacle are examples of clear and direct instructions from God to the people of Israel through His servant Moses. God told Moses exactly what to say to the people.

In the building of the tabernacle, we are told the people constructed it "according to all that the Lord had commanded Moses". God gave detailed instructions through Moses, and the people built it exactly as instructed (Exod. 39:42-43).

The word of the Lord to and through Jeremiah

We read in the first chapter of the Book of Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 1:4-5

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I have appointed you a prophet to the nations."

"Now the word of the Lord came to me" tells us that these are the very words of the Lord.

When Jeremiah told the Lord he did not know how to speak because he was just a youth (1:6), the Lord responded:

Jeremiah 1:7, 9

7 But the Lord said to me,
"Do not say, 'I am a youth,'
Because everywhere I send you, you shall go,
And all that I command you, you shall speak.
9 Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the
Lord said to me,
"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.

The Lord intended to send Jeremiah and would instruct him exactly what to say. He would put His words in Jeremiah's mouth.

The following verses show us that God instructed Jeremiah in very precise terms, giving him the exact words to speak to the people of Israel.

Jeremiah 2:1-2

1 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
2 "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, 'Thus says the Lord,
"I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,
The love of your betrothals,
Your following after Me in the wilderness,
Through a land not sown.

Jeremiah 3:1

God says, "If a husband divorces his wife
And she goes from him
And belongs to another man,
Will he still return to her?
Will not that land be completely polluted?
But you are a harlot with many lovers;
Yet you turn to Me," declares the Lord.

Jeremiah 7:1-4

1 The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,
2 "Stand in the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and
say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you of Judah, who enter by these
gates to worship the Lord!' "
3 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "Amend your ways and
your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place.
4 "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the Lord,
the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.'

Jeremiah 8:1

"At that time," declares the Lord, "they will bring out the bones of the
kings of Judah and the bones of its princes, and the bones of the priests
and the bones of the prophets, and the bones of the inhabitants of

Jerusalem from their graves.

Jeremiah 8:4, 13

4 "You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord,
 "Do men fall and not get up again?
 Does one turn away and not repent?
 13 "I will surely snatch them away," declares the Lord;
 "There will be no grapes on the vine
 And no figs on the fig tree,
 And the leaf will wither;
 And what I have given them will pass away." ' "

The vision of Obadiah

The whole Book of Obadiah is basically also of this form. Obadiah begins in this way:

Obadiah 1:1

The vision of Obadiah.
 Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom—
 We have heard a report from the Lord,
 And an envoy has been sent among the nations saying,
 "Arise and let us go against her for battle"—

"The vision of Obadiah" is basically in the form of words: "Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom". The words came to Obadiah in a spiritual experience that he describes as a vision. The words are not from Obadiah himself, but are directly from the Lord.

The oracle of the word of the Lord through Malachi

The Book of Malachi begins this way:

Malachi 1:1

The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

It was the word of the Lord for Israel, spoken through Malachi. The message was clear. It was not adulterated by Malachi's own thoughts and thinking. It was all from the Lord, exactly what the Lord wanted to communicate to Israel through Malachi.

Malachi 1:2

"I have loved you," says the Lord. But you say, "How have You loved us?"
 "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob;

Malachi 2:1-2

1 "And now this commandment is for you, O priests.

2 "If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the Lord of hosts, "then I will send the curse upon you and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart.

Malachi 3:1

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 4:1

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace; and all the arrogant and every evildoer will be chaff; and the day that is coming will set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts, "so that it will leave them neither root nor branch."

We thus see that God can and He did communicate directly and clearly to His prophets and also to His people through Moses and His prophets in this manner. A significant proportion of the content of His instructions to His people in the Old Testament is in this form.

How God worked in and communicated through His servants as seen in the New Testament

In contrast to the Old Testament, a significant proportion of the truths and instructions, exhortations and warnings in the New Testament does not consist of such clear, direct communication from the Lord to His people through His servants, the apostles.

What is conspicuous is the absence of these introductory words: "Thus says the Lord". But it is not merely the absence of this introductory phrase. What is significant is the way God chose to communicate in the New Testament.

Many of the exhortations and instructions from the Lord to His people through the apostles in the New Testament are by means of epistles. There are relatively few clear, direct instructions and words from the Lord in the epistles. In other words, the Lord did not tell the apostles, "I want you to communicate these words to the people", and they then repeated the words of the Lord.

Rather, the epistles or letters were written by the apostles, addressing specific individuals or groups of people in their contexts. The apostles dealt with various issues that they were concerned about. They spoke from their own understanding of the situations and issues involved. What they wrote in the epistles flowed forth from what they had learned, from the store of spiritual wisdom and knowledge they had accumulated, and from the spiritual stature that they had attained to. The content of the epistles flows forth from this reality, from their hearts and from their lives.

Let us look at some examples.

The epistles of Paul

In 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed various issues confronting the church in Corinth. Paul did not say, "God told me to tell you this" or "These are the words of the Lord." It was Paul writing to them: "Paul ... to the church of God which is at Corinth".

The Epistle to the Corinthians begins this way, which is common in the other epistles of Paul:

1 Corinthians 1:1-2

1 Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, Paul exhorted the Christians to be made complete in the same mind:

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

10 Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.
11 For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.
12 Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."
13 Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

It was Paul himself, not the Lord, who was exhorting them. Yet Paul exhorted them "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement". He was an apostle called by the Lord. He spoke according to his understanding of the situation at hand, in fellowship with God and with the authority of the Lord.

Paul expressed concerns over various aspects of the lives of the Corinthian believers:

1 Corinthians 3:1-2

1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.
2 I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

He addressed and dealt with the problem of immorality in the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 5:1, 3-5

1 It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.

3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.

4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus,

5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

In chapter 6, Paul addressed the issue of bringing a brother to court:

1 Corinthians 6:1, 5

1 Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints?

5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren,

He gave instructions concerning marriage:

1 Corinthians 7:1-2

1 Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman.

2 But because of immoralities, each man is to have his own wife, and each woman is to have her own husband.

He shared his understanding of how the believers should consider issues relating to things sacrificed to idols and spiritual gifts:

1 Corinthians 8:1

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies.

1 Corinthians 12:1

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

Paul also addressed various issues regarding the Galatians in the same manner, and shared his views. Paul began his epistle to the Christians in Galatia in this way:

Galatians 1:1-2

1 Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man,

but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),
2 and all the brethren who are with me,
To the churches of Galatia:

In Galatians 4:1, he expressed his view:

Galatians 4:1

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything,

In the Old Testament, God rebuked the people, chastening and warning them. In the New Testament epistles, we see instances of Paul rebuking believers. And here, in his epistle to the Galatians, we see him rebuking the believers in Galatia:

Galatians 3:1-3

1 You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?

2 This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?

3 Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?

These words of rebuke are not directly from the Lord. However, because Paul was an apostle "not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1), and because he had attained to that stature where he could meaningfully speak on behalf of God, we can say that God was also rebuking the Galatians through Paul.

What Paul expresses in his epistles are in line with what God wants to communicate to His people. They addressed issues relevant to the groups of people and the various churches the epistles were written to. And, as part of the Scriptures, they are also relevant to God's people of all times.

However, we must bear in mind that the epistles of the apostles in the Scriptures belong to a special category. There are other epistles written by the apostles which are not part of the Scriptures and they do not have the same weight and authority. What God desires to communicate to us through the Scriptures (of which the epistles in the New Testament form a part) is intended by God to form the basis for our knowledge of the truth and how we ought to live our lives.

Paul's epistles are very rich in content, revealing major issues, such as what is in God's heart, His will for His people, how they should live, and how they can fulfil God's eternal purpose, including church life. Paul's letters do not come in the form of God telling the apostle Paul exactly what to write to His people. Rather, they come in the form of Paul addressing various churches according to what he had understood and learnt from the

Lord. However, what God intends for us to understand and learn from Paul's epistles can go beyond what Paul himself understood in meaning and reality.

Let me make an observation from 1 Corinthians 7.

1 Corinthians 7:25

Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy.

It is interesting that Paul said: "I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion". God did not command him to say these things. Paul was giving his opinion. He said: "I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy". Paul's opinion is not frivolous or fleshly. It is trustworthy – from a trustworthy servant of the Lord. It is an opinion that flows forth from what the Lord had taught him and the spiritual stature he had attained. It is opinion that he gave prayerfully. He communicated to the degree he understood of the situation.

Paul expressly states: "I have no command of the Lord". He is expressing what he has come to understand, which is in line with God's intention and desires. If Paul's spiritual state were not good, if he were not in fellowship with God, then the opinions he expresses would not be trustworthy.

God speaking to us through the epistles

Like the epistles of Paul, the epistles of Peter, John and James were written according to their understanding of the situations and the principles and issues that were relevant and important. What they wrote flowed forth from the reality within their hearts and from the spiritual wisdom, knowledge and stature that they had attained to.

From the New Testament, we can draw some important principles concerning the way God works in and communicates through His servants. The apostles were men of great spiritual stature and understanding – men in deep fellowship and partnership with God. God intends that the epistles they wrote communicate what has been upon His heart concerning the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes, and that these epistles should form an important part of the Scriptures.

The epistles are important documents. They are an important source of revelation and the basis on which God wants us to work out our lives. Yet they come to us not in the form of God speaking directly, but through the lives and teachings of the apostles.

God's intention for us: nurturing of spiritual reality in our lives

As can be seen in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, there is a progression in the way God desires to work in and through us, from Old Testament times until today.

We can say that this is how God desires to work in and through our lives. He wants to

help us grow in spiritual stature, wisdom and knowledge, and respond to issues, situations and people in fellowship with Him, with understanding that flows forth from the reality within. It would not be so meaningful if God were to always tell us exactly what to say or do and we merely carry out His precise instructions and repeat the exact words.

In my understanding, from the angle of fellowship, participation, our growth and development, this is God's preferred way of communication to us. And all these have to do with the very heart of God's intentions for man, that we grow in spiritual stature and that we can have a meaningful part in the outworking and fulfilment of His purposes. A person may appear spiritual when he can receive very clearly God's instructions, telling him exactly what to do and what to say, but in fact, this may not be so helpful or desirable in the long term.

The Lord desires that we not only communicate the truth, but also live out the truth. Our lives should be an embodiment of truth – the truth becoming a part of our lives – so much so that when we look at situations and people, we do so from the reality of having seen and lived out the truth in our own lives.

When we have such a reality in our lives, our ministry will have a greater impact. We will not just be communicating words, but also spiritual life and reality. The more the truth is lived out in our own lives, the more effective our ministry will be. This communication of truth from our lives will flow forth not just from the words that we speak, but also from the very lives we live. This is how God wants His children to speak on His behalf and this is what it means to be faithful representatives of God. We will consider further in the later part of this message how this area of truth can be lived out as we reflect on the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Having obvious spiritual experiences may not make a difference to the quality and stature of our lives, and may not be evidence of spiritual health and maturity. What is important is for us to develop true inward quality, to become more and more like the Lord Jesus in the beauty of His character and in His closeness with the Father. This is what it means to be truly strong.

Thinking through issues – vital to the process of growth

Some of us may be concerned that if God does not communicate clearly to us in the way He did to the prophets, we may be in a predicament as we would be unsure what the will of the Lord is. What if we make a mistake? Yet if we pause to ponder – the fact that we are uncertain and the possibility of making a mistake can be meaningful in the whole process of growth.

If God were to constantly speak very clearly and directly to us – telling us what to do and what to say at every turn – then it would no longer be needful for us to prayerfully consider each matter and the issues involved. If we were to ask the Lord, "Lord, what is Your will?" and the Lord tells us, "Do this", do we need to think through any further? No.

The will of the Lord would have already been revealed, and it would then be simply a matter of getting it done. This is not helpful for our development or for our participation in His work.

When God does not make things clear to us in this way, it becomes needful for us to exercise ourselves to prayerfully consider and to think through the issues. The fact that we may be uncertain or may make mistakes helps us to exercise greater care, especially if the issues involved are significant.

It is good to learn to be careful and responsible. The very process of thinking through the issues and the principles involved – trying to understand what is taking place and how to respond wisely – is a very important part of our learning process and our growth to maturity. This is what God desires of us, and we must not be complacent, negligent or slothful in these areas.

The Scriptures has been inspired by God for our learning. The principles are there to guide us. God wants us to think through how to apply these various principles in the situations we go through. When we go through this process well, our minds are renewed and the truths and principles become more and more a part of our lives.

Even when we do make mistakes, we can learn from them and try to understand what went wrong. God has a sovereign hand in each situation and does sometimes work to alleviate the negative consequences of our mistakes where He sees fit.

We can see similar principles at work in the bringing up of children. Is it good for parents to always tell their children exactly what to do? Is there not a place to encourage them to think through issues, and within a certain framework, to allow them to decide for themselves? If they make a mistake, they can learn from it so they can fare better the next time. However, we must be more careful when major issues are involved. Where there are areas of danger, we need to exercise greater care in supervising and guiding our children. Likewise, God guides and supervises us according to His perfect wisdom for our good and our spiritual growth.

Growing in spiritual wisdom and knowledge

God working in this way is also an incentive for us to seek to grow in spiritual wisdom, knowledge and stature. We learn to value highly spiritual knowledge and wisdom. This is in line with scriptural teaching and emphasis. How well we grow in spiritual knowledge and wisdom is related to our attitude and moral qualities.

Let us look at chapters 1 and 8 of Proverbs, which extol wisdom and knowledge. The Book of Proverbs begins in this way:

Proverbs 1:1-5, 7

- 1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:
- 2 To know wisdom and instruction,

To discern the sayings of understanding,
3 To receive instruction in wise behavior,
Righteousness, justice and equity;
4 To give prudence to the naive,
To the youth knowledge and discretion,
5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning,
And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,
7 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Wisdom is associated with "righteousness, justice and equity" (v. 3). There is a moral content to it. It is found in a right relationship with God and reverence for God. This passage tells us it is important to learn to be wise, to grow in knowledge, and not to be naive or foolish.

Proverbs 1:20

Wisdom shouts in the street,
She lifts her voice in the square;

Proverbs 1:24-28, 31, 33

24 "Because I called and you refused,
I stretched out my hand and no one paid attention;
25 And you neglected all my counsel
And did not want my reproof;
26 I will also laugh at your calamity;
I will mock when your dread comes,
27 When your dread comes like a storm
And your calamity comes like a whirlwind,
When distress and anguish come upon you.
28 "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer;
They will seek me diligently but they will not find me,
31 "So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way
And be satiated with their own devices.
33 "But he who listens to me shall live securely
And will be at ease from the dread of evil."

These verses warn us not to neglect wisdom and knowledge. We must seek to grow in wisdom and knowledge so we know how to go through all situations well.

Growing in wisdom and knowledge is a process. It takes time. We cannot desire wisdom only when we need it. If we do not value knowledge and wisdom and do not pay attention to nurturing this aspect of our lives, we will not have the wisdom to respond to situations when we need it. On the other hand, verse 33 assures us that those who pay due attention to this aspect of life "shall live securely, and will be at ease from the dread of evil".

I shall now refer to some passages in chapter 8.

Proverbs 8:8, 12-13

8 "All the utterances of my mouth are in righteousness;
There is nothing crooked or perverted in them.

12 "I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,
And I find knowledge and discretion.

13 "The fear of the Lord is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverted mouth, I hate.

Again, it shows there is a moral content associated with wisdom. Wisdom is related to righteousness, prudence and discretion, and disassociates itself from pride, arrogance and the evil, perverted way.

Proverbs 8:17-21

17 "I love those who love me;
And those who diligently seek me will find me.

18 "Riches and honor are with me,
Enduring wealth and righteousness.

19 "My fruit is better than gold, even pure gold,
And my yield better than choicest silver.

20 "I walk in the way of righteousness,
In the midst of the paths of justice,

21 To endow those who love me with wealth,
That I may fill their treasuries.

We should long for wisdom and knowledge and seek for it with the right attitude of heart. With it come the benefits – true riches and honour, enduring wealth and righteousness in God's kingdom.

The path of wisdom and knowledge is one of blessedness, abundant life and God's favour. Rejection of wisdom and knowledge results in death and destruction:

Proverbs 8:34-36

34 "Blessed is the man who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates,
Waiting at my doorposts.

35 "For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the Lord.

36 "But he who sins against me injures himself;
All those who hate me love death."

The importance of wisdom and knowledge can also be seen in the way Paul prayed for the Christians in Ephesus and Colossae. He prayed that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened and that they may grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding (Eph. 1:17-18; Col. 1:9).

What I have mentioned as God's preferred way of speaking to us and His approach in communicating with us is an incentive for us to seek for and grow in true knowledge and wisdom.

Let us now learn from the way God communicates to us through the Lord Jesus so as to appreciate God's manner of working and how God desires to work in and through us.

God's communication through the Lord Jesus Christ – the Word

Why is the Lord Jesus known as the Word (John 1:1)? One major aspect has to do with communication. God communicates truth to us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus – the Word of God.

Let us consider what Hebrews 1:1-3 says about God speaking to us through the Lord Jesus.

Hebrews 1:1-3

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,
2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.
3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,

In the past, God spoke through the prophets in many different ways. But in these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son, who is the God-man. He is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature (Heb. 1:3). Arising from this perfect reality within the Lord Jesus, God communicates to us perfect, unadulterated truth through His life and ministry, through His conduct and words.

Through the Lord Jesus Christ, God is demonstrating to us that it is possible for divine truth and reality to come forth through humanity. The Lord Jesus is not merely God; He is also human. But His humanity does not blur nor diminish the divine truth and reality that emanates from within. He is the faithful representative and expression of the will, the character and the life of God the Father. He communicates unadulterated truth in all its fullness and richness of meaning because He is Light and Truth and the exact representation of God's nature.

God desires man to be His faithful representative

God desires that we too become His faithful and effective representatives – with the Lord Jesus as our perfect example. The divine life and truth in all its depth and richness must become increasingly real in our lives. As this reality is lived out and expressed

through our lives, we become more and more effective as God's faithful representatives on earth.

As God's ambassadors, we are to proclaim the truth. But it is not just a proclamation of words. God wants to communicate the truth to the world through the words we speak and also through every aspect of our lives and conduct – in the same way He has done through the Lord Jesus Christ.

To be true ambassadors for Christ, we must proclaim the truth with words that flow forth from the realities within. How can this be done? By learning, growing and then living, acting and speaking with meaning, reality and life. And this is possible because God is working within us. As we submit to His working, our minds are being renewed and our lives transformed. Increasingly, Christ will be formed in us. As we live in fellowship with God, guided and empowered by His Spirit, we not only can meaningfully experience, but also express the life and the reality that God intends for His faithful children and representatives.

Concluding remarks

Those of us who love the Lord would want to serve Him well. To be able to do so, we must learn to say what God wants us to say and serve in the strength which God supplies. We must be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man. This is what the apostles Peter and Paul tell us in 1 Peter 4:11 and Ephesians 3:16.

1 Peter 4:11

Whoever speaks, is to do so as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves is to do so as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Ephesians 3:16

that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man,

We need to set our hearts on learning and growing well so that we may become truly strong. Being truly strong and serving the Lord well is not just a momentary spiritual experience or for specific occasions. It is meant to be a continuing experience and reality. We must become strong in the inner man and strive to grow in spiritual stature and effective service. If we do so in our own strength, it will get us nowhere. It must be according to His power.

Colossians 1:29

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Paul tells us how he laboured and strove according to the power of God which mightily

worked within him. We must learn from Paul's example to labour and strive according to God's power.

2 Thessalonians 1:11

To this end also we pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power,

We should concentrate on growing well in the Lord, so that we will be transformed and be in a position where God can meaningfully work out His plans and purposes through our lives, in whatever form He sees fit.

Blessed are they who do not see, and yet believe

Let us learn deeply from the words of the Lord Jesus to Thomas in John 20:27-29.

John 20:27-29

27 Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing."

28 Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

29 Jesus said to him, "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed."

Thomas had expressed doubts when he was told by the other disciples they had seen the Lord.

John 20:25

So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."

The Lord Jesus appeared to Thomas so he could see the risen Lord for himself, as well as feel Him with his own hands. When Thomas then expressed faith in the Lord Jesus, He said to him: "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed" (v. 29).

I see here the Lord Jesus is trying to teach us that the principle of living by faith means we do not live merely on the basis of the visible realm. This does not mean that we should just believe whatever we are told, especially when there is no proper basis. Paul exhorts us to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7), and God is pleased when we learn to live in this way. When we are preoccupied with or unduly impressed by obvious, dramatic spiritual experiences, it may be an indication that we are spiritually immature and that something is amiss in our walk with the Lord.

When we have faith of reasonable quality, it is feasible to appreciate the truth, perceive

reality and recognise God's ways, even when these are not in obvious forms. This is a manifestation of true faith.

Warning against an unhealthy desire to see obvious manifestations of God's power

In Mark 8:12, we see the Lord Jesus sighing deeply in His spirit. It is not often that we are told the Lord Jesus sighs. So there is something significant here for us to take note of.

The Pharisees were arguing with Him and seeking from Him a sign from heaven to test Him.

Mark 8:12

Sighing deeply in His spirit, He said, "Why does this generation seek for a sign? Truly I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."

Out of their hardness of heart, they wanted to see a sign – a manifestation of God's power in a more obvious form. The Lord Jesus, sighing deeply in His spirit, said: "Why does this generation seek for a sign?"

In a similar verse in Matthew 12:39, He expresses it this way:

Matthew 12:39

But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet;

Let us be careful in our whole approach to life. Yes, we desire to know the Lord and His ways more deeply, and we desire to grow well in the Lord. But we must not have an unhealthy desire and craving for the spectacular, for the obvious – for "an evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign".

Let us learn to be able to recognise what is important in the eyes of the Lord, to concentrate on meaning and reality, rather than be unduly impressed with and attracted by the outward appearance of things, the dramatic and spectacular and what appears spiritual.

God can work in spectacular ways, according to His perfect wisdom. But let us leave it to the Lord to work as He sees fit. On our part, let us concentrate on what really matters – to learn to grow well, that we can be ready and available to the Lord for whatever He desires for our lives.

Let us prayerfully ponder over our lives. Do we seek to understand the will of God? Do we seek to grow in true wisdom and knowledge, with right motives and attitudes? Are we sensitive to what He desires to communicate to us? Are we cooperating with Him? Are we responding well to the different situations and issues of life? Let us seek the Lord

in learning to be true, effective, faithful representatives for Him in this fallen world.

Questions for reflection and discussion

1. Share your understanding of the proposition: *Although God may speak to us in clear and direct ways, most of the time He prefers to speak to us in less dramatic and less obvious ways, when it is feasible for Him to do so meaningfully.*

Do you think there are good reasons for God to adopt this approach today? If so, what are they?

2. Reflect on the way God communicates truth to and through His servants in the Old Testament, and the way He works in and communicates truth through His servants in the New Testament. What are the implications?
3. What can we learn from the way God communicates truth to us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus – the Word of God? How does understanding this help us appreciate how God wants us to be His faithful and effective representatives?

www.godandtruth.com

Copyright

The content of this message is protected by Copyright © 2014 Lim Kou. Permission is given to print and reproduce part (where the meaning intended is retained and the part is not quoted out of context) or all the content, for personal use or for distribution, on condition that there is proper acknowledgement, no changes are made and the content distributed free of charge. Please be prayerful and discreet in distributing or making the content available to others. *This paragraph and that below should be included in any and all content reproduced for distribution.*

Scripture Quotations

Scripture quotations unless otherwise stated, are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.