STANDING FIRM IN A SHIFTING CULTURE

UNSHAKABLE

"Full of things that we today need urgently to take to heart."
— **J. I. Packer**

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT AND ROD MAYS

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To John Weiser—one of Zion's children

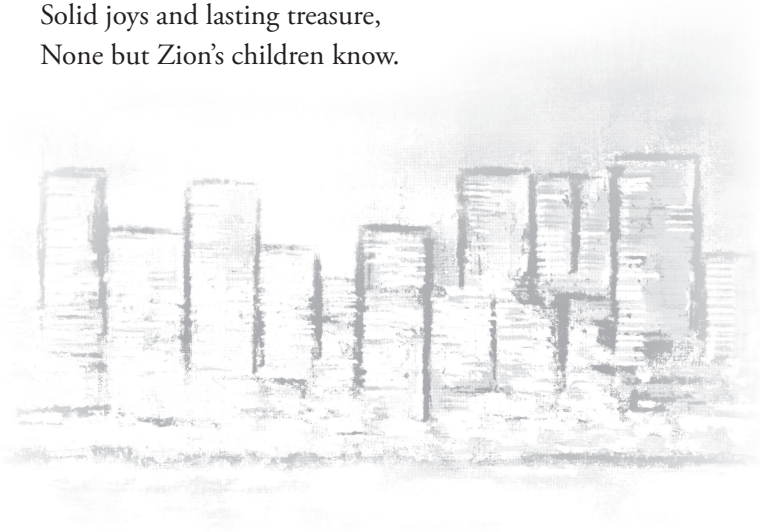
GLORIOUS things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose word cannot be broken,
Form'd thee for his own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

See! the streams of living waters
Springing from eternal love,
Well supply thy sons and daughters,
And all fear of want remove:
Who can faint, while such a river
Ever flows their thirst t'assuage?
Grace, which, like the Lord, the giver,
Never fails from age to age.

Round each habitation hovering,
See the cloud and fire appear!
For a glory and a covering,
Showing that the Lord is near:
Thus deriving from their banner
Light by night, and shade by day;
Safe they feed upon the manna
Which he gives them when they pray.

Bless'd inhabitants of Zion,
Wash'd in the Redeemer's blood!
Jesus, whom their souls rely on,
Makes them kings and priests to God:
'Tis his love his people raises
Over self to reign as kings,
And as priests his solemn praises
Each for a thank-offering brings.

Saviour, if of Zion's city
I through grace a member am;
Let the world deride or pity,
I will glory in thy name:
Fading is the worldling's pleasure,
All his boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure,
None but Zion's children know.



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PREFACE

There is something compelling about the life stories of people who have been radically changed by God. The "this-is-what-I-was-but-this-is-what-I-am-now" stories capture our attention. Perhaps this captivation is due to an understanding of the power of sin in our lives and the hope of the power of the gospel.

In Romans chapters 7 and 8, the apostle Paul shares his all-consuming struggle with sin. By the middle of chapter 8, Paul turns his attention to describing his hope in the work of the Holy Spirit in spite of his constant struggle with sin. This assurance of God's redeeming work in Paul's life is grounded in the cross of Christ. Paul's struggle, his circumstances, do not define his position before God. His position before God is founded in the obedient life and death of Christ his Savior. At the end of Romans 8, Paul writes with certainty about the ultimate victory he will enjoy, when his life is consummated in glory. Paul's experience, from Romans 7–8, reminds us of the "bookends" of the normal Christian life. Throughout the believer's experience, daily circumstances lead him to cry out with Paul, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24). How sweet to be able to contemplate the truth of Jesus' work in the middle of the struggle: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35).

One of the great "this-is-what-I-was" stories is that of John Newton. His transformation from vile slave trader to Anglican minister and hymn writer is well known by now. One of his best-known hymns, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," has served as the inspiration for this book. This hymn encourages believers to remember God's protection of his people. He will never fail us. He will guide and provide for us, all because we have been "washed in the Redeemer's blood."

John Newton was born July 24, 1725, in London. His mother taught him the Bible but died when he was seven. His father seemed uninterested in rearing his son. Newton spent his early life as a sailor and slave trader. He was miraculously converted during a storm at sea. After his conversion, he attempted to continue in the slave trade and tried to restrain its inherent evils in his own practices. He eventually quit sailing and was ordained in the Anglican Church. Newton took a parish in the village of Olney. He later met William Cowper, a poet who had moved to Olney. Cowper's life was marked by periods of severe depression. Newton took Cowper into his home on several occasions when it became difficult for Cowper to live alone. Newton was a pastor to Cowper, encouraging Cowper to write hymns based on his suffering and his awareness of God's work during these difficult times in Cowper's life. The hymns of Newton and Cowper (a collection of approximately three hundred) became known as the Olney Hymns. Some 233 of these compositions are attributed to Newton.

Newton's hymns, such as "Amazing Grace," "I Asked the Lord," and "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds," contain obvious references to his own profound understanding of sin in the human heart. His appreciation for his unworthiness of God's love, as well as his gratefulness for the pardoning grace of God, finds clear expression in all his writings. It was this

understanding of God's grace and his own sinfulness that led him to show such compassion to Cowper.

Newton's perception of the pervasiveness of his own sin caused the cross to be an immeasurably large factor in his life. It was said of Newton, "He believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him an habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit."[1] John Newton was a faithful husband to Mary for forty years. He died December 21, 1807, at the age of eighty-two. He continues to speak to us today through his hymns.

Hymns are alternately defined as songs of praise or spiritual songs. By definition, their purpose is to tell the story of redemption. Older hymns connect us with the past as we see how Christians from earlier generations applied the gospel to their lives in times of wandering, struggling, disappointment or joy, and celebration. Newton's hymns are rich with theology. In the preface to the Olney Hymns, he wrote, "The views I have received of the doctrines of grace are essential to my peace; I could not live comfortably a day or an hour without them. I likewise believe . . . them to be friendly to holiness and to have a direct influence in producing and maintaining a gospel conversation; and therefore, I must not be ashamed of them."[2] Newton also stated, "The scripture which teaches us what we are to say is equally explicit as to the temper and spirit in which we are to speak. Though I had knowledge of all mysteries, and the tongue of an angel to declare them, I could hope for little acceptance or usefulness, unless I was to speak in love."[3]

1. Richard Cecil, "Memoirs of the Reverend John Newton," in *The Works of the Reverend John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 170.

2. John Newton, *The Works of the Reverend John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 3:303.

3. Ibid., 5:131.

Newton describes the Christian life with refreshing honesty in his hymns. He does not engage in sugarcoating, sanitizing, or romanticizing the believer's experience in an effort to communicate a pious, stoic response to daily struggles. Through his hymns, Newton speaks directly to our experience, allowing us to see his own joy and sorrow in trials and sufferings, his life of learning the reality of faith. His hymn, "I Asked the Lord," captures this thought:

I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace,
Might more of His salvation know and seek more earnestly His face.
'Twas He who taught me thus to pray, and He I trust has answered prayer,
But it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair.
I hoped that in some favored hour at once He'd answer my request,
And by His love's constraining power subdue my sins and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel the hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.
Yea, more with His own hand He seemed intent to aggravate my woe,
Crossed all the fair designs I schemed, cast out my feelings, laid me low.

Lord, why is this, I trembling cried, Wilt Thou pursue Thy worm to death?
"'Tis in this way," the Lord replied, "I answer prayer for grace and faith."

"These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set
thee free
And break thy schemes of earthly joy that thou mayest seek
thy all in me."

These beautiful words show Christians what it means to be honest about our sin. Consequently, these hymns do not encourage Christian pretense, as if our salvation means that we are better people in and of ourselves. They do not erect barriers to unbelievers, who resent piously pretentious hypocrisy. Because these hymns are grounded in Scripture, the words transcend the sometimes popular idea that the church and God are not relevant. The poetic language both connects us to the past and speaks to our present circumstances.

Following Newton's example, how do we love those who are suffering? What can we communicate to them with that habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit that characterized John Newton's love? How do we show compassion to those whose marriages are falling apart? How do we encourage parents of rebellious, difficult children? What do we say to those who are overwhelmed with the problem of too little money, or too much? Is there tenderness and compassion in our voices and attitudes when we talk to others about their sexual confusion, addiction to pornography, or chemical substances? Are we patient and loving to those who suffer from depression and disappointment, who may be victims of their own sin or the sins of others? What is the basis for the hope we can give?

What guides us and informs our answers, both for others and for ourselves? "He, whose word cannot be broken," helps us think through the answers. How does the gospel impact the way we engage other people? "See! the streams of living waters springing from eternal love . . ."; we love others as we have been

loved. How can I rest in Christ? "Safe they feed upon the manna, which he gives them when they pray . . ."; prayer brings rest and peace as we acknowledge that only Jesus can help. What does faith in Christ look like as we struggle against the power of sin? "Washed in the Redeemer's blood . . ."; that promise gives the hope of future glory with Christ. What shapes my relationships? "Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show." Genuine love is selfless, and motivated by gratitude for the redemption we have received in the Son.

As Newton's great hymn—and the gospel truths of Scripture that lie behind it—provides the backdrop of this book, our hope is that we will, together, be encouraged to set aside those sins that cling so closely. In the midst of a world sometimes overly enamored with the new and with change, we hope that those "things that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:27) will become our only hope, that in the words of Newton, "solid joys and lasting treasure" will become the defining character of our walk with Christ.

1: SAYS WHO?

HE WHOSE WORD CANNOT BE BROKEN

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
He, whose word cannot be broken,
Form'd thee for his own abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
What can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

Today's young adults face some special challenges.[1] Whatever the proper label—whether postmodern, postconservative, or posteverything—the ideas and beliefs of popular culture have so inundated life in this world that such ideas and beliefs can all too easily become a natural part of our thinking and living. A college student on a typical campus today has learned the cultural drill well: "Doubt everything taught by anyone; submit your ideas

1. What we use as a label for these young adults—Generation X? Millennials?—is not terribly important, in part, because it is inexact, and, in part, because what we say here really applies to all of us.

to no authority." To fail to doubt is to fail to be heard. Perhaps no demographic in the history of our country has been fed a daily diet so heavy in tolerance and inclusiveness and so light in truth as these newer generations have. Any form of authority exists to be challenged, ignored, and likely rejected. To accept the ultimate authority of any person, document, or institution is to be bigoted, intolerant, unloving, and self-righteous.

The conventional wisdom dictates that we view the drama of life played out around us with a combination of cynicism, skepticism, and suspicion. In a context of such confusion, it is hard to convince oneself of what is real, or really important. We have been taught to take hold of our own destinies and to create our own reality. In far too many cases, we have attempted to do exactly this—and seen disastrous results.

The newer generations living in the twenty-first century have never known what life is like without television or videocassette/CD/DVD recorders or TiVo. Because of technology, we can, at least in some sense, "create" the reality we desire. It is now possible, for example, to program electronic screens with what we want to see when we want to see it. We can use preselected iPod tunes as the soundtrack for our lives. This has the double effect of, on the one hand, creating the feelings and ambience we desire, and on the other hand, letting the rest of the world go by.

In this kind of environment, many of the new generation say they believe in Christianity, that they trust God and his Word, but become tongue-tied, embarrassed, or defensive when their beliefs are questioned or challenged. Not only so, the notion of a universal authority that applies to one and all is almost completely foreign to the contemporary context. The authority of Christ and his Word is acceptable at the personal level perhaps, but it is almost a foregone conclusion that it cannot be applied to everyone.

Not too long ago, a group of students (twentysomethings) gathered for a Bible study. The speaker had spent a fair amount of time discussing the authority and truth of the Bible with these self-professed Christian believers. Near the end of the meeting, group members began to ask questions: But what about the Qur'an? What about the Book of Mormon? How do the findings of numerology or "historical facts" contained in other ancient documents affect the authority of the Bible? Is there really only one way to God? Are not all religions just different ways of saying the same thing? Why should we believe the Bible's claims over the claims of other religions? There seems to be a significant gap in the ability of most today to synthesize the truth of the Bible with what we see around us. Because of this inability, the Bible is reduced to the level of helpful personal advice and inspirational thought.

The problem posed in reconciling biblical truth with apparent contradictions in experience, of course, is the problem of authority. This problem is not a new one. And the questions that come today have their central focus in the question of truth and authority. The focus of the question may change in different periods of history, but the basic question is always the same: To whom or what should I ultimately submit? How can I know what is true and what is not?

AUTHORITY'S SOURCES

It may come as no surprise to students of history, especially the history of thought, that in today's confused climate two primary views on the source of truth or authority emerge. People seem to believe either that truth is what makes them feel good and works best with their experience (which is sometimes labeled *empiricism*) or that truth is what makes sense to them objectively

and intellectually (which is sometimes labeled *rationalism*). Are either of these approaches acceptable in developing and nurturing a system of truth and a notion of authority?

If It Feels Good . . .

Empiricism is, by definition, the obtaining of knowledge through the senses, or through experience. Right experiences will bring an understanding of truth—or so we think. These experiences, both emotional and physical, are often defined by the popular media that inundate today's generation, including music, television, film, and poetry. Media of this kind can create an ambience of authority because they tell stories in ways that are appealing. In music, the stories are told with a particular mood or beat, making them easy to remember and repeat. In television or film, they are told with images, visual art and effects, and musical score, all of which combine to capture imaginations and promote ideas and worldviews. In most cases, however, the stories told, the images produced, and the effects desired have their sources in just another human emotion, experience, or desire. It can be tempting to commit oneself to a particular song's or movie's "message." But these messages themselves only go as deep as the individual(s) who produced them.

If history teaches us anything, it is that human beings are not particularly good at defining their own happiness. We are not adept at articulating clearly what it is we really want. Some of what we think we want may be good; we may think what we want is simply the absence of conflict with other humans or the absence of conflict within ourselves. But even if these goals are good ones, the solutions offered may not be. Remedies offered for getting rid of these conflicts—things like more money, more time, fewer responsibilities, more autonomy, or maybe just the ability to have the ultimate makeover (of home, hair, teeth, or brain)—are all

supposed to provide what we need. If they provide for our needs producing less conflicted lives, they must give us truth.

In keeping with the empirical, some may base their lives on what they "feel" like doing at any given time. They may not feel like going to class, or studying, or going to work. In seeking to orchestrate the right feelings, we may seek to change the atmosphere (music, entertainment, activity), the location (new city, new apartment, new bed), the vocation, or the surrounding family (spouse, parents, siblings) and friends (new significant other, new group, or new church). Change may create a sense of busyness and thus a distraction from reality, an escape from the everyday grind, and an illusion of self-created happiness.

But isn't distraction really just a means of escape? We turn up the music and get lost in the melody and the words, hoping that the pain and negative feelings pass. Movies, concerts, and sporting events provide the opportunity to be caught up in the excitement of the crowd and carried along by our feelings for a little while. Enjoying music and attending sporting events certainly are not wrong. What is troublesome is when we expect these things to deliver the right feelings and thus to be a source of truth or authority.

I Think, Therefore . . .

Rationalism is knowledge or belief gained through reasoning. The fields of philosophy, science, and mathematics have long been the strongholds for rationalistic thought. This is mirrored in a perverse view of man's creativity and intellectual superiority in which such things are to be the source of truth and authority. Concepts that don't make sense to "the experts" are too easily and quickly rejected in today's culture, fostering the opinion, "I am right because I trust the experts on 'x.'" Educational credentials often become the sole basis for credibility. But educational credentials

have their own agenda. Biblical teachings such as creation or miracles have been ruled out-of-bounds in much of academia.

Many questions from the disciplines of philosophy, science, and mathematics are designed to evoke a skeptical view of Christianity: "If there is a god, why are there not more positive miraculous occurrences and fewer calamities?"; "Why is there so much evil in the world if God is good?"; "Why would you put your trust in someone as narrow-minded as Jesus?" There are no philosophical, scientific, or mathematical formulae that can answer such questions. In a context of rationalism, this means that the questions themselves are designed to show the naiveté or irrelevance of religion. Raising the dead by a spoken word, rather than heroic, scientifically based medical means, is not an activity science has any real interest in affirming.

AUTHORITY'S AUTHOR

So how does the Christian respond to these challenges? How do we think about the empirical and the rational? How do we think about events recorded in the Bible when science disagrees? How do we think about the conflicts between Scripture and culture, or Scripture and philosophy, or Scripture and science, or . . . ? How do we face these difficulties and work through them in light of our Christian commitment and in light of God's Word?

If the tendency is to approach Scripture as inspirational reading, is it possible to view it as an absolute authority? To speak of the Bible's authority is to be perceived as being intolerant, which is seen as the mark of the simpleminded and unintelligent. Above all, today's generations seek to be open and teachable and loving. Jesus' words of exclusivity do not fit with the rational, reasoned voices calling for freedom in religious practice. It doesn't seem right or wise to speak openly about a religion that states there

is only one way to God or that there is only one God. It just doesn't seem to make sense.

But doesn't the notion of "making sense" itself have its own cultural, philosophical, and scientific bias? Does it make sense that God would part a sea to allow an entire nation to walk through on dry ground? Does it make sense that out of all the stars and planets, our one solar system supports human life and is the recipient of his grace? Does it make sense that Jesus, who is divine, would take a human body and suffer physical pain? Does it make sense that God's incredible range of creativity in plants and flowers and animals was given for man's enjoyment? These things do not make sense to our rational or empirical processes. It is no wonder, then, that students ask why the Qur'an, the Book of Mormon, or the writings of Buddha or Confucius don't hold just as much authority as the Bible.

JESUS AND AUTHORITY

For the Christian, the question is, why should I stake my life and hope on the Christ of the Bible? Those who investigate the validity of Scientology, Christian Science, Ellen White and the Seventh Day Adventists, or groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, have addressed the question of the authority of the Bible. The question is as old as history itself; it dates back to the garden of Eden and extends through the New Testament. An incident at the initiation of Jesus' public ministry will help us to focus the issue:

> Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21–22)

When Jesus Christ began his public ministry, he was declared by his heavenly Father to be his "beloved Son." This announcement did not escape the notice of the powers of darkness. Almost immediately after the Father announced his good pleasure in his Son, Jesus "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil" (Luke 4:1–2).

How did the Devil begin his temptation? He wanted Jesus to give him proof that he was the Son of God. The question the Devil was asking was the question of truth and authority. He wanted to know how he could know that Jesus was God's only begotten Son. He wanted to know if it was true that Jesus was the Christ. So, he approached Jesus with three "opportunities"—three temptations through which Jesus could show the Devil, and show him conclusively, that he was the one the Father proclaimed him to be. The Devil gives Jesus three different offers. Two of the three are a demand for proof that Jesus was the Son of God, as the Father had said. Notice,

> "*If you are the Son of God*, command this stone to become bread." (Luke 4:3)

> And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "*If you are the Son of God*, throw yourself down from here." (Luke 4:9)

One way to think about this temptation in the wilderness is to see it as a challenge by Satan to Jesus. Satan demands that Jesus provide, to his satisfaction, the ground for truth and authority. The Devil was confronted with God himself, in his Son. But that was not enough; the Devil wanted proof, and so he demanded, "Show me."

In that light, it is important for us to ask: "How did Jesus

respond to the Devil's requests?" How did Jesus "show" the Devil that he was who God the Father proclaimed him to be? Surely if Jesus is God he could have easily turned stones into bread. He could have thrown himself down from the pinnacle of the temple without harm. But he didn't.

Instead, Jesus turned the Devil's attention not to himself, but to God, and specifically to what God had said in his Word. In response to the challenge of authority, Jesus quoted Scripture. In response to the temptation to turn stones into bread, Jesus said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone'" (Luke 4:4). Why did Jesus respond this way? The Devil wasn't asking about *how* we are to live or about whether one can live by bread alone. The Devil wanted Jesus to do something that no mere mortal could do. Did Jesus just dodge the challenge he was given? No, he didn't.

Jesus responds this way because he knows that the Devil's challenge will not be answered if Jesus performs some powerful act. The Devil's problem is not that he has failed to see God act in miraculous ways. The Devil's problem is the problem that plagues all who will not bow the knee to Christ; it is that he will not believe what God has said.

There was a similar temptation given many years before this one, as it turns out, by the same tempter. It was a temptation given not in the wilderness, but in a lush and plenteous garden:

> Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.
>
> He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" (Gen. 3:1)

The Devil does not come to Eve to tell her to disobey, at least not at first. He comes to Eve so that he might get her to question

the word of God. And he tempts her by asking a question that is *close* to the truth, but is actually a denial of it. God had *not* said that Adam and Eve could not eat from any tree; he had said that there was one particular tree from which they were not to eat. The Devil knew that. His question was not one of curiosity. His question was designed to get Eve, and Adam after her, to disobey. And he succeeded.

When Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, he knows that the Devil's design is to get him to stop trusting what God has said. So, instead of arguing with the Devil about Jesus' own powers, Jesus replies to the Devil in a way that shows that he is trusting what God has said. Even though he has been in the wilderness for forty days, and even though he is hungry, he knows, *because God has said*, that his life is not defined by what he eats. It is defined by the "spiritual" food of God's Word. God had already said, "You are my beloved Son." No more proof was needed.

Here is Jesus, the perfect Son of God. If anyone could trust his own experience, it was Jesus. He could have been a perfect empiricist. If anyone could trust his own thinking, it was Jesus. He could have been a perfect rationalist. His experiences and his thinking were never affected by sin. They were perfect. But unlike us, though Jesus *could have* trusted himself, he didn't. He trusted God's Word alone.

Now, the question we must ask is, whom do you trust? Do you trust your own experience to guide you into all truth? Do you trust your own mind to give you all that is necessary for this life and the next? Or do you trust "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4)? Do you want to put your faith in yourself? Or would you rather put your faith in one in whom millions, for over two thousand years, have trusted, not only for their "spiritual food" in this life, but also in the life to come as well?

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SON

We have been discussing the problems unique to a "new" generation of people—people who have grown up in a context in which truth is supposed to be confined to each individual or group and in which the notion of authority, if applied at all, is meant to always be up for debate.

But, as we have been hinting all along, the problems that seem unique to this generation are not unique at all. Though contexts and concerns have varied over the centuries, the issues have not varied. They have remained relatively uniform throughout history.

Around two thousand years ago, there was a small but significant group of Hebrew Christians who were struggling with many of the same issues that we have been discussing.

The contexts, of course, were different. We should not expect that the issues faced by first-century Hebrew Christians would conform exactly to those faced by twenty-first-century folk. Though the contexts in which the Hebrews struggled and lived were different, the contours of their struggle were, at significant points, coincident with ours.

One of the occasions for writing the epistle to the Hebrews was that issues of truth and authority—issues that this group of Jewish Christians had, in the past, addressed by its strong commitment to Christ—were now under suspicion.

The Jewish people had a rich and deep tradition. It was a tradition that has no equal in history. As we write this, the United States has just celebrated another July 4. That date is set aside to mark the beginning of a new nation, now well over 200 years old. Though that may seem like a long history, it is merely a blink compared to the history of Israel.

God treated Israel unlike any other nation on the face of the earth, working mightily and miraculously for their sake. In the

United States, debates have swirled around the question as to whether God was "on our side" in various conflicts and wars. But there was no need for such debates in Israel. God had declared to Israel that he was on their side (see Gen. 17:8; Jer. 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 37:23, 27; Zech. 8:8).

But, as is often the case, Israel's strength became her weakness. One of the things that plagued the Hebrew community to which this epistle was written was that it was in danger of letting its rich and deep traditions eclipse the truth.

Throughout history, the people of God had lived out their relationship to God by way of relying on God's appointed messengers. In some instances, those messengers were angels (see Gen. 19:1–22; 28:12; Ps. 91:11). In others, the chosen messenger of the Lord was Moses (see the book of Exodus). In still others, Israel was to live out its relationship to God according to the appointed Levitical priesthood (see Deut. 17:9, 18; 18:1; 24:8; 27:9; Josh. 3:3; 8:33; 2 Chron. 5:5, 12; 23:18; Jer. 33:18, 21–26; Ezek. 43:19; 44:15; Heb. 7:11).

To rely on these messengers, *as God's appointed messengers*, was not sinful; indeed, a lack of trust in these messengers would have been tantamount to a lack of trust in God. God had appointed them for various tasks, at various times in history. As appointed by God to serve him, they were also meant to be trusted with the tasks God had given them.

Part of the problem that the author to the Hebrews had to address was the confusion that had set in since Jesus Christ had come. Those messengers that were at one time and place the chosen vehicles for God's purposes for his people had now been, once and for all time, replaced by Christ himself.

Yet some were still tempted to put their confidence in lesser things—things that were, in themselves, not sinful, but were nevertheless not meant to be the "focus or locus" of their confidence and

trust. These Christians had mistaken the *instrument* through which God's truth and authority came with that truth and authority itself.

And now we can begin to see that the problems immediately addressed in the book of Hebrews are problems that relate to our twenty-first-century predicaments. We should expect no less, since God has seen fit to give us, in his Word, principles that are applicable across the historical spectrum. We will look at these principles in the opening verses of this epistle:

> Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. (Heb. 1:1–4)

Notice how abruptly the author begins this epistle. Compared to so many other epistles in Scripture, where Paul, for example, will first introduce himself, this epistle stands out as unique. It is so unique that many surmise that this letter was a sermon preached and then written to these Jewish Christians.

There were serious problems in this community of Christian Hebrews. The people were in danger of drifting away from the faith and of neglecting the salvation that had come to them (2:1–3); their disobedience was about to get the best of them, even as it had their forefathers in the wilderness (chapter 4); they were immature, not because they were recent converts (by this time, they should have been teachers), but because they had become dull of hearing (5:11–12). They still needed spiritual

milk and were not prepared for solid food. So serious was their immaturity that some were in danger of irretrievably losing the salvation they had previously claimed to have (6:1–20). So, the author writes this word of encouragement (13:22) to bring about repentance unto life.

It should strike us, therefore, that the author begins not with a personal introduction or even with a direct response to these serious problems, but with an acknowledgment of the rich and deep tradition of God's dealings with his people.

We should not pass over the first verse too quickly. The author is quick to point out that *God* indeed spoke to his people in various ways and at different times. The Hebrew Christians who received this epistle had not been wrong about their own tradition (at least not initially). They were right to see God's use of angels, and of Moses, and of the Levitical priests as important aspects of his relationship to them. The problem was not with the *instruments* of God's revelation through history. The problem was that some among them now wanted those instruments to become the ultimate *source* and *ground* of truth and authority for them. They had misplaced their notion of truth and of authority. Sound familiar?

We discussed the two primary sources of authority and truth that are often put forth: the senses (empiricism) and the mind (rationalism). These are not sources that have been chosen by God as messengers of his special revelation. But we, like this group of Hebrews, have mistaken these good and necessary *instruments* for ultimate sources or grounds of truth.

The question of authority is one that, perhaps now more than in times past, occupies center stage in much of contemporary discussion. Whatever postmodernism's identity, one of its abiding tenets was first set forth by Jean-François Lyotard and is contained in his (in)famous phrase that the postmodern condition is marked

by an "incredulity toward metanarratives." This phrase is not as opaque as it may at first seem. Lyotard's point was simply that there should be no overarching and overriding principle or system (a metanarrative) that would determine the shape and direction of what we claim to know and believe. To put it another way, we are to reject such universal principles or systems. This has the effect of destroying any principle or system that would unify otherwise disparate beliefs or "truths." It also has the effect of assuring us that there is no universal authoritative principle or system that applies to our own set of beliefs and practices.

Under the influence of this tenet, the question of truth and authority becomes paramount. I may decide that truth for me is whatever I can practice without causing personal harmful consequences. If I can sit at my computer and access illegal material without harming anyone, then it must be that such material is "true" for me; it is a legitimate understanding of "reality" for me. There can be no constraints against my actions; no authority that can hinder them. If I can engage in relationships that are personally satisfying to all involved, then such relationships must be "true" for us all. To paraphrase one postmodern, "Truth is whatever I can get away with." It is simply a matter of personal taste based on personal preference and practice.

Whatever it was that plagued these Hebrews, the author wants to make sure that his readers get the truth and authority matter settled before anything else can be addressed (and there is much more, as we will see, that *needs* to be addressed). The same is true for us (and for this book). Unless we settle the matter of authority first, we will be forever confused and confounded with the issues that press in on us every day. We may be able to live with the decisions we make on a daily basis; we may even be able to find others who are living with the same confusion. But "living with" such decisions and beliefs is only a way of avoiding

what we know to be true. It is only a thin shield, able to mask and cover the reality that is deep within us.

What is it, then, that we need to know about God's authority and truth? What is it that will solidify us, that will plant us firmly, so that we will not be confused and tossed about by every new idea that comes to us? It is the same thing that these Hebrews needed to know. It is that, though God chose various means of revealing himself to his people throughout history, all of those means were simply channels, rivers, and tributaries of God's revelation, flowing toward and leading inexorably to that great ocean of final revelation that God has given to us in his Son.

This is the first point to understand. God has spoken in Christ. Or, as the author of Hebrews puts it more pointedly, God has spoken (literally) "in a Son." The reason that the author writes this way ("in *a* Son" rather than "in *the* Son") is not to highlight that Christ is a son among many sons. Given everything else that the author says about Christ in these few verses, the point he is making is a categorical one. In past times, God did speak through appointed means—"*by* prophets." But now, God has revealed himself by means of a completely different category of revelation; now he is revealed "by Son."

The Hebrews would have seen the tremendous import of this categorical shift. It was a shift that was declaring those former means of revelation to be past their time of usefulness. It was a shift from using human and temporary means of revelation to God now using himself as the final mode of revelation to his people.

Note also how the author frames the temporal categories. This revelation, "by Son," is the completion of a long history of God's revelation to his people. As completing God's revelation, the Son is in continuity with what God had done in the past, but is also uniquely discontinuous with what God had

done previously. God spoke "long ago" or (as it could also be translated) "for a long time" at various times and in various ways "by the prophets." Here the author acknowledges the history of God's revelation to his people.

It is worth noticing in this opening chapter of Hebrews just how the author chooses to cite Old Testament references. Even though he quotes from Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel, and the Psalms, he is not concerned to note the human instruments God used to write these works. Rather, he notes in every case that this is what *God* says (1:5–13). In each case, the author states that God said these things. This is *God speaking* (through different human instruments) "long ago" at various times and in various ways. He then connects that history with the revelation that has come in the Son. This is its continuity.

More significant, however, is the way in which the author highlights the radical *discontinuity* between this diverse way of God revealing himself and the now climactic revelation that has come in Christ. The revelation that has come in the Son has come "in these last days." But just exactly why are these days "the last"?

The answer to that question points us again to God's revelation. The reason these days are the *last* days, is because God's *last* revelation has been given. The "days" of God's calendar are, in other words, defined not first of all by their length or their number on a calendar. The days of God are defined by the *kind* or *category* of revelation that he gives at a particular time in history.

To put the matter another way, if these days were not the last, then there would necessarily be another, and more, revelation that God would give in history. Not only so, but the clear implication would be, from what the author says, that the revelation given "in a Son" was itself insufficient and incomplete; more, better, and clearer revelation would still be needed.

But the logic of the author's argument in these first few, magnificently rich verses is striking in its opposition to such an idea. This Son, in whom God has now lastly spoken, is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." It would be difficult to find a more exalted description of Christ. The two phrases, "the radiance of the glory of God" and "the exact imprint of his nature," are meant to say virtually the same thing in two different ways.

Students of the Bible will readily recognize echoes of the beginning of the gospel of John in our passage. This should not be surprising, since, in spite of the different contexts and concerns of the author to the Hebrews and the apostle John, God authored both books. So, after John clearly sets forth the fact that the second person of the Trinity, the Word, is himself God (John 1:1), lest there be any mistake, he asserts, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

This Word, who is God, came down to dwell among us. And this One who came was not only the Word, he was the Son. John then recalls the time when he, with Peter and James, was given the opportunity, on the mountain, to see this Son in his eternal glory (Matt. 17:1–13, Mark 9:2–8). He recounts this event in the context of his declaration that the Word dwelt among us to emphasize that the dwelling with us in no way eliminated the great truth that this Word was God. His glory was "as of the only Son from the Father." The glory that John saw was "the radiance of the glory of God." It pointed to the fact that this Word, this Son, remained, even as he dwelt among us, "the exact imprint" of God's very nature.

These Hebrew Christians would have understood that the glory of which the author spoke was the very glory of God—his

shekinah presence with his people (see Ex. 24:15–18) that was now revealed in the Son.

Is it any wonder, then, that the revelation that has now been given in the Son is the final and completed revelation from God? If that revelation was not only "in the Son" but was, in fact, *God himself* revealing himself, is it even possible that there might be more, better, or clearer revelation to come in history? How could there be an expectation of "more" or "better" when the highest and exalted One *himself* has condescended to reveal himself to us? Wouldn't any other revelation pale in comparison to the revelation that we have in the very Son of God himself, especially since this Son is the radiance of Yahweh's glory and the exact imprint of his nature?

But notice that the author of Hebrews is not only concerned that we understand clearly who this Son is. That is crucial. But it is just as crucial that we understand not only that the revelation that has come to us in the Son has come simply and only in his *person*, but also (and this is all-important for our purposes) that *God has spoken to us* in this Son. The author is not concerned simply with Christ as *personal* revelation, but he is primarily concerned (in this passage) to emphasize that God *has spoken* to us in this one who is "true God of true God."

In other words, it is the Person of the Word of God as he gives to his church the *written* Word of God that is paramount in the author's mind. The point his readers need to see, as do we, is that *God has spoken* through this final and complete revelation of himself in his Son.

This Son, through whom God has finally and lastly spoken, is the one who, having made purification of sins, "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." There is no more exalted view of the *authority* of God to a Hebrew mind than this. To sit at God's right hand is to have all the authority of God himself. It

is to *be* God himself in his sovereign capacity to reign (Pss. 60:5; 63:8; Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:33–34; 7:55; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Rev. 5:1, 7). So important is this to the author that he places the thought at strategic places in his letter (see Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). He wants his readers to understand that this Son who has spoken has been given all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18).

The "truth" question and the "authority" question are all summed up in the Person. That much is clear. But for the church in "these last days," the issues of truth and authority are summed up in the written *Word* of the Son in Holy Scripture. The truth of God and the authority of God are summed up in what God has spoken in his Son.

HAS GOD SAID?

But questions linger—questions that relate specifically to our current predicament. If *God* has spoken, how can we know such a thing? Don't we need the foundation of our senses, or our mental faculties, or both, to *know* that God has spoken? And if our senses and mental faculties are subject to so many variables, how can they be trusted to give us anything but probability?

In Charles Dickens' classic tale, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge meets the spirit of his old business partner, Jacob Marley, for the first time, seven years after Marley's death. But Scrooge is initially skeptical:

> "You don't believe in me," observed the Ghost.
>
> "I don't," said Scrooge.
>
> "What evidence would you have of my reality, beyond that of your senses?"
>
> "I don't know," said Scrooge.

> "Why do you doubt your senses?"
>
> "Because," said Scrooge, "a little thing affects them. A slight disorder of the stomach makes them cheats. You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!"[2]

We all know that our senses and our mental faculties, no matter how acute, are too feeble and fickle to be ultimately trustworthy as *sources* of truth. This does *not* mean that they are not *instruments* of truth, but they are not equipped to generate what is needed when the source or ground of truth and authority is in question. Not only so, but since the entrance of sin in the world, we have a sinful bent against ultimate truth and authority, unless God so changes our hearts as to rejoice in such things.

So what can provide what we need? Is there any way to be sure that God's Word is just that—*his* Word? These questions seem to dominate our times, when all authority and certainty are being questioned. They are important questions; they are questions that get at the root of our relationship to God. In order to address these typical and natural questions, we need to delve more deeply into what we mean when we speak of the "ground" of truth and authority.

The question of the ground or foundation of the world and everything in it is not a new one.[3] As far back (at least) as the philosopher Aristotle, the question of the ground of everything else was discussed and debated. In such debates, two things were

2. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1845), 27.

3. We will use the term *ground* here as a kind of technical term and for simplicity's sake. Historically, however, the term used in theology was *principia*, which is translated as "foundations" or "sources." It is a term that has its roots in the Greek term *archē*, which means a beginning point, a source, or a first principle.

clear: (1) whatever ground we determine to be in place, it must be such that it has nothing behind or beyond it. To posit something behind or beyond this ground would make that thing the ground; (2) it is impossible to continue positing a ground, of a ground, of a ground, of a ground, etc. For a ground to be a ground it has to be that upon which everything else rests. Aristotle argued that all grounds or first principles or beginning points are the "first point from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known." In other words, "grounds," according to Aristotle, provide the bedrock foundation for everything that is or is known. This concept of a beginning point, what some have called an Archimedean point, is a necessary and crucial aspect of everything that we think, indeed, of everything that *is*.[4] Aristotle understood this, philosophy has continued to articulate this idea, and Christian theology has seen it as basic to its own discipline.

We can think of grounds, by analogy, the way we think of the physical ground underneath us. What is it that supports the room that I am now in? It is the boards in the floor. But what supports those boards? The beams underneath. What supports those beams? It is the ground underneath and around those beams. What supports the ground? Well, the ground supports itself. It is the support without which nothing else could be a support. As is the case physically, so it is with questions of ultimate authority, truth, etc. There is a "place" beyond which we cannot go and without which we cannot move. That place is the ground or "grounds."

The theology that was resurrected during the time of the Reformation (sixteenth century) and beyond argued that all disciplines, especially theology, require grounds, and that such

4. Because it was Archimedes who said, "Give me a place to stand and I will move the world."

grounds partake of at least the following characteristics: (1) they are necessarily and unchangeably true, and (2) they must be known *per se*, that is, in themselves, as both immediate and indemonstrable. "Immediate" here means that the status of a ground is not taken from something external to it, but is inherent in the thing itself. It does not mean, strictly speaking, that nothing mediates the truth therein, but rather that nothing external to the ground mediates that truth. Similarly, "indemonstrable" here means that the fact of a ground is not proven by way of argument using principles external to that ground, but is such that it provides the ground upon which any other fact or demonstration depends.

This concern for grounds, historically, had its focus in two primary disciplines: philosophy and theology. In philosophy, the concern was expressed in the thought and philosophy of René Descartes. For all that separated Descartes's philosophy from the Protestant theology of his day—and there was much that did—the concern for grounds was common to both. Descartes thought that his grounds were "clear and distinct ideas" concerning first the self and then God. These two, in that order, were supposed to provide the foundation for everything else that could be known. But Descartes' rationalism (since he wanted to begin with innate *ideas*) only led to skepticism.

Christian theologians during this time argued, against rationalism, that grounds could never be located in the human self. To do so would lead to the kind of skepticism that followed in the wake of Descartes' philosophy. What, then, is the ground of theology? What is it that can provide the foundation, the source and beginning point of all truth and authority? To ask the question is almost to answer it.

In the Westminster Confession of Faith (perhaps the ablest expression of Protestant doctrine in the entire history of the

church), the authors set out, for the first time in church history, a *Protestant* doctrine of Scripture. In chapter 1 of the Confession, section 4, the authors wrote:

> The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

Notice that the subject of this section is the *authority* of Scripture. They are answering the question of *grounds* for such authority. On what *grounds* does this authority depend?

It does not depend on any man or church. This was stated, negatively, to make clear that this was a Protestant and not a Roman Catholic doctrine of Scripture. But notice here that the authors say, in effect, that the authority of Holy Scripture depends on its *author*. It is the *author* of Holy Scripture who makes Scripture what it is.

The fact of the matter is, if we fail to see Holy Scripture as authored by God, and therefore as the *ground* of its own authority, we will fail to understand what Scripture actually is.

And, as the Confession makes clear, if we want to know why we should accept Holy Scripture as the Word of God, it is "*because it is the Word of God*." That is, not *simply* because it says that it is; many books make such claims. Rather, we accept it because God is its author and *God* says that it is. To appeal to something behind, above, or beyond this is to think of Scripture (and God) as something other than the ground of truth and authority.

Isn't this what Jesus himself was saying to the Devil in the wilderness? Jesus had the power to show Satan who he was. But

Jesus also knew that whatever he did would detract from Satan's central objection. His objection was not that he hadn't seen all he needed to see. Jesus knew that Satan's objection was focused on the fact that he did not believe what God had said.

Jesus illustrated this same principle in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). The rich man in Hades asks that there be demonstrations of power and miracles displayed to his five brothers so that they might not suffer the same torment. What is the response to this request? "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (Luke 16:31).

Hearing "Moses and the Prophets" means hearing the Word of God. Jesus reminds the rich man that his brothers, like him, have all that is needed to avoid the torment of Hades. They have the Word of God that was spoken "by the prophets" and by Moses, and that has now been spoken "in the Son."

John 6:60–71 gives us the same truth. There Jesus is teaching many of his disciples that the only way one may come to him is if the Father grants it. The message must have gotten through; it was a message that stripped away any hope of salvation by human merit or action. That message has never been a popular one. So, in the course of Jesus' instruction, "many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him" (6:66).

Jesus then asked the twelve if they, too, would turn away. Simon Peter's answer is instructive: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68).

Peter's question gets to the heart of the matter as we think about the ground of authority and truth. Where else can we go but to the word of Christ himself? He alone has the words of eternal life. Is there any other standard, principle, or foundation that carries with it the authority of God himself? Is there any other standard, principle, or foundation that just *is* God

himself, revealed in the flesh and thus giving to us "the words of eternal life"?

A FIRM FOUNDATION

In the hymn "How Firm a Foundation," the author begins by attesting to the fact that the foundation that we have in the Word of God is both firm and complete:

> How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, is laid for your faith in his excellent word!
> What more can he say than to you he hath said, to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?

The foundation that we have in God's Holy Word is firm. It is secure. It is certain. It is the ground upon which anything else—any truth or any authority—must rest. And the question asked in this stanza is meant to be rhetorical: What more *can* he say? God has spoken through his own Son. No other revelation can compare; no other revelation is needed.

And so, we can now see why the Word of God cannot be broken. It has its roots in God speaking through his various agents in history. It has its climax in God speaking through his Son. It has its focus in God speaking in every word of Holy Scripture, which is, itself, God's own speech.

No wonder Newton, as he contemplated this great truth, asked, "On the Rock of Ages founded, what can shake thy sure repose?" No wonder this truth gave him confidence in those things "that cannot be shaken" (Heb. 12:28). What, indeed, can shake thy sure repose? The Word of God, and the salvation it offers, are founded on the Rock of Ages.

No current trends, no sophisticated arguments, no intense

temptation has the power to break that Rock. If it is on Christ the solid rock we stand, then we are always and everywhere protected from such onslaughts in the shadow of his mighty wings.

With salvation's walls surrounded,
Thou may'st smile at all thy foes.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the average person's general idea of authority?
2. Is there anything in your life that you use as an escape or avoidance? How can distraction be a means of escape? What are some examples in your own life?
3. "Some may base their lives on what they feel like doing at any given time." How often do we not do something based on not "feeling" like doing it? Do we sometimes rely too heavily on our emotions?
4. In the wilderness, Satan tries to tempt Jesus, but Jesus redirects the temptation and points back to God. In what ways does Jesus accomplish this? How may we use this method in our lives?
5. As you examine your heart, do you find ways in which you, like the Israelites, are tempted to idolize the messengers of the Bible rather than focusing on God? Explain.
6. What are two sources of authority that are often misused? Are they ultimate grounds of truth?
7. What are the reasons the Word of God cannot be broken?
8. What is the final revelation that God has given us? How can God now categorize this as his last revelation?

LET THE WORLD DERIDE OR PITY, I WILL GLORY IN THY NAME.

We have a hope to hold on to and to hold out to others—how do we explain it? How do we love those who are suffering or speak to the overwhelmed? Do we show tenderness and compassion?

In today's culture, truth claims are suspect. Many stand on the shaky ground of relativistic postmodernism. Many are deeply anxious. Yet Christians possess a treasure that cannot fade or disappoint—they should be unshakable.

What does this look like day by day? Hundreds of years ago, John Newton wrote a hymn containing timeless answers to questions and issues that press us. Now Rod Mays and K. Scott Oliphint delve into the gospel truth of "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken"—and the Scripture beyond it—to discover what we need in life, what should guide us, what faith in Christ looks like, how we should engage with others, and more.

INCLUDES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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