



Progressive Revelation

by Kevin Thompson

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Aside from the context of a scripture (both in terms of the immediate verses preceding/following and the general situation or time period in which the scripture was spoken or applied), one of the most important keys to understanding scripture is progressive revelation. Humanity has not always known as much about God, the spiritual realm, and ourselves as we do today. This frequently colored their perception of life's events and God. It is important to understand who is speaking in the Bible, what their level of revelation is, and what their covenant with God was. Lacking this information, we might take something to be truth for ourselves in this day that is very far from truth.

Our goal is to show how humanity has progressively come to understand the Lord better and better.

God's Word is not only God's words

First and foremost, we must affirm that we believe the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. Men were inspired to write it by the Holy Spirit, it cannot contain errors, and it does not contain errors (in its original form). But, not every word written in the Bible was spoken by God Himself. Many of the authors were inspired to record the words spoken by other humans. In some cases, these humans were not themselves inspired. Therefore, their words *may* represent truth, but not necessarily.

II Chronicles 32:15

Now therefore let not Hezekiah deceive you, nor persuade you on this manner, neither yet believe him: for no god of any nation or kingdom was able to deliver his people out of mine hand, and out of the hand of my fathers: how much less shall your God deliver you out of mine hand?

Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, had sent his servant Rabshakeh to threaten Judah. Rabshakeh clearly states that God was not able to deliver Judah from the hand of the Assyrians. As demonstrated in the following verses, God was not only able but He was willing. Ezra (the writer of II Chronicles) was inspired to record the words of Rabshakeh even though his words were not true. Ezra merely recorded history as it happened.

This is an extreme example. It is clear that these were not the words of God and it is obvious the words were not true. But, it easily illustrates the point that not every word in the Bible represents God and truth. We must consider carefully words spoken outside of the inspiration of God. This obviously includes those outside of relationship (covenant) with God, but at times even those in covenant with God were speaking as humans not under the inspiration and knowledge of God.

We must of course be conservative in applying progressive revelation as sparingly as possible. But, it needs to be a tool we may employ when necessary to understand the Word of God properly.

Job

The book of Job is notoriously one of the most difficult books of the Bible to understand and interpret. But, part of the reason for this difficulty is our failure to apply progressive revelation to what we are reading.

Job was a man that likely lived during the time of Abraham. Since there is no mention of the Law, the ten commandments, a temple, or anything related to Moses and the Exodus, this seems to be a reasonable assumption. Perhaps the only revelation Job had was that God was El Shaddai - the Lord Almighty. He probably knew nothing of the seven redemptive names of God. He was not born again and therefore did not have the Holy Spirit to reveal truth to him. So, as we look at statements made by Job, we should be careful to note that he perhaps understood very little about God, God's ways, Satan, the spiritual realm, and how we relate to God.

Job 1:21

And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

While we should admire Job's simplistic trust of the Lord, his statement that Lord had taken from him is in direct contradiction of what really happened. The inspired writer of Job tells us that Satan had stolen from Job. This is the truth. It is clearly confirmed in the New Testament:

John 10:10

The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.

The devil is the one who steals, kills, and destroys. This is exactly what the beginning of the book of Job explains to us. God is for us. But, Job did not have a covenant with God. Men had given control of the earth to Satan. God had no right to protect Job from Satan. God wanted to bless Job and had done so (and would do so again). God was for Job. But, in the context in which Job lived, Satan was in control of the situation. He was the one who stole from Job. But, Job did not have this spiritual revelation. He was ignorant, and his words were not true.

The fact that God eventually rebuked Job and all three of his friends (only the fourth friend Elihu was not rebuked) clearly showed that their words were not all true. The inspired writer of Job recorded their sayings as a historical account, but they were not all true.

Old Covenant

Once God offered a covenant to the descendants of Jacob, much more was revealed about God and His expectations for humanity. But, nevertheless misperceptions abounded because the revelation was incomplete. God could reveal some aspects and concepts about the Messiah and his ultimate plan for saving humanity, but these pictures and practices were often incomplete and the Jews often resorted to just following rules for the sake of following rules. But, even in their failure to do that consequences followed.

Naomi

Ruth 1:13, 21

¹³Would ye tarry for them till they were grown? would ye stay for them from having husbands? nay, my daughters; for it grieveth me much for your sakes that the hand of the Lord is gone out against me.

...

²¹I went out full and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?

In these verses, Naomi is speaking. She was an Old Covenant Jew who had left Israel for Moab (due to a famine) with her husband Elimelech and their two sons. After the sons had married non-Jews in Moab, Naomi's husband and her sons all died. In these verses, she is laying blame for all of his misfortune at God's feet.

But, it was not God's fault that all of this had happened to her.

Deuteronomy 7:3

Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son.

Deuteronomy 23:3

An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever.

Elimelech and Naomi had specifically violated their covenant with God. Their sons had married Moabite women which was strictly and specifically forbidden under the covenant. In that covenant, there were consequences for disobedience (as outlined in Deuteronomy chapter 28). In this case, Elimelech and his sons lost their lives leaving Naomi's life shattered.

David's Census

Two accounts are given of David's census of the Israelites.

II Samuel 24:1

And again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah.

I Chronicles 21:1

And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.

The book of II Samuel was written some time around 930 B.C. or so. I Chronicles was written by Ezra about 430 B.C. Around 500 years have passed between the writing of these two scriptures! Is it not possible that the Jews had learned more about God and the spiritual realm during that time? By Ezra's time might they not have understood to some extent that there was a spiritual battle going on for the hearts and minds of men?

Some indication of the truth of this can be seen in the books of Isaiah (14:12-14) and Ezekiel (28:12-19) where some of the few mentions of Satan in the Old Testament occur. These books were written around 700 B.C. and 570 B.C., respectively. This shows that knowledge of Satan and the spiritual realm was growing between the two scriptures about David's census.

So, what is the final conclusion? In the times of the book of II Samuel, the Jews understanding of God was closer to Job's understanding - bad and good things are all caused by God. So, II Samuel 24:1 attributes David's sin to God provoking him. In the times of Ezra, the Jews understood that at least some bad things were caused by other spiritual forces, namely Satan. So, in I Chronicles 21:1 Ezra was inspired by God to record the additional insight that it was actually Satan who provoked David. Revelation had progressed and additional information was understood and brought to light.

Solomon, Paul, and Eternity

In the scriptures given below, Solomon and Paul are saying almost the exact opposite things.

Ecclesiastes 3:19-22

¹⁹For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.

²⁰All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

²¹Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth?

²²Wherefore I perceive that there is nothing better, than that a man should rejoice in his own works; for that is his portion: for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him?

II Corinthians 5:1-8

¹For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

²For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven:

³If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked.

⁴For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.

⁵Now he that hath wrought us for the selfsame thing is God, who also hath given unto us the earnest of the Spirit.

⁶Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord:

⁷(For we walk by faith, not by sight:)

⁸We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

Solomon doesn't seem to see any difference between man and beasts - they all die and go back to the dust. So, he concludes that man should enjoy life while he has it.

We must remember that Solomon was not born again. He did not have the Holy Spirit inside him. He did not have the example and proof of the resurrection in Christ. Ecclesiastes is an attempt to carry the logic of man as far as it can be taken with just knowing God is holy and will judge everything eventually. Without further revelation from God, life can appear to be finite.

Contrast this with Paul's revelation in II Corinthians chapter 5. From beginning to end Paul is vividly describing a life after death with a new eternal resurrection body. Paul had the example of Christ and the Holy Spirit dwelling inside him to reveal these great truths. This graphically demonstrates how the level of revelation man had received from God had progressed from the time of Solomon to the time of Paul.

The Transitional Period

The period of the Gospels when Jesus lived and walked the earth was a time of rapid advance in the revelation of who God is. But, because of the reason and nature of Jesus' ministry on earth, the revelation of the New Covenant would still be incomplete in some areas.

As we watch Jesus interacting and ministering to people, we see who God is and what His heart is. But, Jesus was living under the Old Covenant. He was fulfilling the Old Covenant. He had to instruct others to live by the Old Covenant (or else He would have sinned). All of these reasons and factors play into the level of revelation Jesus could bring while He was here. At times the ministry of Jesus was necessarily legalistic and in contradiction with the New Covenant to come. He was constrained by the Law. It would only be through the Holy Spirit in the apostles that the full New Covenant revelation could be brought forth.

One of the greatest examples of this are a set of verses that have vexed many Christians and caused them to get all knotted and twisted in unfortunate doctrines.

Matthew 6:15

But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Ephesians 4:32

And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.

Colossians 3:13

Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.

Jesus, while ministering in the flesh on earth under the Old Covenant, said that we must forgive in order to be forgiven. But, Paul twice states that we should forgive because we have been forgiven. These statements directly contradict each other. Who is right? They both are, when we recognize progressive revelation and put them in their proper context.

We have the temptation to think that since Jesus said it and He was God that what He said must take precedence. On the surface, that has some truth to it and is worth considering. But, Jesus was ministering under the Old Covenant. His statement here was part of the Sermon on the Mount. The whole point of that Sermon was to show the Pharisees that they were living the letter of the Law and not its spirit. The context is therefore a teaching about the Law and the state of affairs during the time in which Jesus was living. They needed to forgive to be forgiven because that was the nature of the Law - you obey and you are blessed, you disobey and you are cursed.

But, we do not live under the Old Covenant. We live under the New Covenant. The New Covenant was made possible by Jesus and was even introduced in various ways by Jesus. But, it could not be fully understood, taught, and realized until after Jesus was seated at the right hand of the Father and the Holy Spirit had been sent. This is where Paul enters the scene.

Galatians 1:11-12

¹¹But I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man.

¹²For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ.

This scripture tells us that Paul's statements about forgiveness in Colossians and Ephesians came from Christ. Therefore, Christ spoke all of the contradictory verses cited above concerning forgiveness. The important point is the context. For us in the New Covenant living on this side of the cross, we have already been forgiven of much. This is the motivation for us to forgive the comparatively little things in this life. Our view and approach to life and God are now different because of Christ.

The New Covenant

And so we arrive in the New Covenant. In addition to the gospels where the heart and nature of God are so clearly revealed, we must look especially to the writings of the apostles to validate statements made in prior stages of revelation whether that be in the Old Testament or the gospels. The latest and greatest revelation about God came from Christ through Paul and the other apostles during the first-century church.

Conclusion

The Bible not only contains false statements made by people not under the inspiration of God, but it also contains rules and concepts that only applied to certain people for a certain period of time because of the covenant they had with God. It is important as New Testament Christians to recognize when Old Covenant concepts are being applied and spoken of. And, whenever an apparent conflict arises, the New Testament statements should always take precedence.

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