

GOD... AND HIS HANDWRITING

Exodus 31:18, Daniel 5:5-8; John 8:3-9

Jehovah always communicated with His people. He spoke through His prophets, presence, and promises, and that system of imparting knowledge never failed until the Hebrews refused to listen, preferring to worship idols who were always silent! The Jews disliked interference of any kind. Their attitude reminds me of a business man in Hong Kong who said, "When the Christian missionaries first arrived they were wonderful. They spoke of Jesus and the love of God, but when they began to speak about sin and retribution, they lost their charm and their listeners!" It is significant that on three separate occasions, the hand of God wrote messages for certain people. Although time destroyed most of the ancient records, His words were indestructible; they will endure forever.

The Handwriting of Guidance... On Stone... Directing  
And he [God] gave unto Moses, when he had made an end of communing with him upon mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God. (Exod. 31:18)

The giving of the ten commandments and other requirements that constituted Hebrew law was one of God's most necessary acts. His people, who had been slaves in Egypt for four hundred years, were an undisciplined multitude, unorganized, unreliable, and unable to understand why certain deeds were prohibited. They had been a nation without spiritual guidance and knew nothing of priests and prophets. They existed only to obey their Egyptian task masters. "Each man did that which was right in his own eyes." There was no inspired standard of morality by which conduct could be judged. The appearance and power of Moses were unprecedented. When the patriarchs who first arrived in Egypt died, their knowledge and experience departed with

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them, and life for their descendants became a miserable existence. They were without hope, happiness, and holiness. Pharaoh was the only deity they knew, and his authority was absolute.

When this strange company of people left Egypt, they were a multitude of nomads attempting to do what had never been done. Moses alone had any military training; his soldiers had no weapons and very little courage. If a man coveted anything, he fought for it, and the winner took all. It has been estimated that Moses led between two and three million people. It was of vital importance that law and order be established before chaos overwhelmed the tribes. Three needs became evident:

1. A Recognition of God's Grace. He had redeemed Israel; they were His.
2. A Realization of God's Greatness. He could be displeased; obedience was mandatory.
3. A Requirement of God's Glory. "Ye shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44).

Many years later Solomon said, "The fear of the LORD IS the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), but that was a lesson that Israel urgently needed to learn. When Jehovah met with Moses on Mount Sinai, the watching and waiting tribes realized they were expected to conform to certain requirements initiated by the Almighty. He who

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could shake the mountain could either shake or hold them. Their future depended upon their cooperation. When Moses descended with the ten commandments, every person knew life would be different. Men could no longer do as they pleased. Jehovah was watching their every act. His "thou shalt not" stirred their conscience and echoed around the world. Might had become subservient to right, and God, not men, decided what was right. It was no longer permissible to take another man's wife, for God said, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." An assailant could not kill his enemy, for God said, "Thou shalt not kill." Thieves were forbidden to rob neighbors, for God had spoken: "Thou shalt not steal." To comply with these requirements a change of conduct was essential throughout the nation. Furthermore, God meant what He said; offenders would be prosecuted, and deliberate violations were punishable by death.

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The Handwriting of Guilt ... On a Wall. .. Denouncing  
In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand, and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaister of the wall of the king's palace: and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another. (Dan. 5:5-6)

Many years later Jesus said, "Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it" (Luke 11:28). Revelation of the divine will beget responsibility. People acquainted with the laws of God cannot attribute their behavior to ignorance. The commandments given by God to Moses were destined to have an effect upon all nations. Today, even non-Christian people accept the ancient laws as a reliable basis for the administration of justice. Even Belshazzar, the king of Babylon, realized what was expected of him. The laws of the Hebrews had made a tremendous impact upon the Babylonian people who were responsible for their conduct. When in the midst of the royal festivities, a hand began to write upon the wall of the palace, it became evident Belshazzar was about to pay for his indiscretions. Daniel said, "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting" (Dan. 5:27).

The palace was a scene of resplendent gaiety; the hanging gardens of Babylon were a paradise. From near and far guests had assembled for the magnificent occasion, and the fact that enemies were encamped at the gates meant nothing. The high encircling walls of Babylon were thought to be insurmountable; the city itself was considered to be impregnable. The wine was flowing freely; the laughter of drunken guests echoed through the night. Then "Belshazzar, while he tasted the wine, commanded to bring the golden and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple which was in Jerusalem." How strange that in the midst of such merriment, the king should suddenly think of God. Surely this was an uprising of conscience. We can only speculate as to the length of time that elapsed before his violent reactions began! God had erected the final barrier on the road to the eternal shadows. Belshazzar's stupidity ruthlessly ignored the obstacle when he sent for the consecrated vessels and continued his blasphemy. "And in the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand and wrote on the wall of the king's palace... 'Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting.'" No man is finally rejected until God's love has done everything possible to save him. God only abandons a person

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when nothing else remains to be done (see the author's book, Bible

High ways [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985], 78).

The Handwriting of Grace ... on the Ground... Delivering And the scribes and Pharisees . . . say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? This they said tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last. (John 8:3-9)

This Scripture mentions the only occasion when the Lord is said to have written something. When the Pharisees made their first accusation stating that according to the laws of Moses the adulteress should be stoned, the Savior probably reminded them they were either misinformed, or were deliberately misquoting the Word of God. Moses said, "And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 20:10, emphasis mine). Since the woman had been taken in the act, it was evident this was a prearranged scheme in which the male participant was permitted to escape. The Jewish leaders were not concerned with the woman's immorality; they were using her in an effort to trap Jesus. When the Pharisees repeated their accusations, the Lord wrote His second message, which in all probability included revelations about themselves. If that were the case, it would explain why the accusers beginning at the eldest, began to leave—they had lived longer, and consequently had most to hide!

"And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:9-11). It was regrettable that this account was not included in the earliest copies of the Scriptures. The compilers misinterpreted the Savior's statement,

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suggesting that if the woman were free from condemnation, others of her type could sin without fear of retribution. Evidently, the early churchmen did not consider why the woman called the Savior "Lord," saying "No man, Lord." Paul said, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (I Cor. 12:3). The soul of the adulteress had been illuminated by the grace of God when she confessed her faith in the lordship of Christ. Since that is the means by which pardon becomes possible, her confession indicated her sins were gone. There was nothing left to condemn. Her past was forgotten; her future lay ahead; she should "go and sin no more."

The handwriting of the Lord assumed great importance. When He issued the commandments, His words emphasized that concealment of sin was impossible. There was no excuse for ignorance—God had spoken. When He wrote on the walls of Belshazaar's palace, it became evident that condemnation of sin was inevitable. God meant what He said. When Jesus wrote on the ground, He indicated that the cancellation of sin was indisputable. Faith in Christ was sufficient to cleanse the vilest sinner.

The word handwriting only appears once in the New Testament; it was used by Paul in Colossians 2:13-14. "And you ... hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;

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Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us... and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross." The Amplified Version of the New Testament translates the verses, "Having cancelled and blotted out and wiped away the handwriting of the note (or bond) with its legal decrees and demands, which was in force and stood against us—hostile to us. This [note with its regulations, decrees and demands] He set aside and cleared completely out of our way by nailing it to [His] cross.

The bond, note, or regulation referred to the law to which sinners were indebted and enslaved. Ancient historians inscribed their data on clay tablets, and the text suggests that the instrument by which the indentations were made had been drawn across the recorded evidence, signifying it was no longer valid. What had been written had been cancelled. The Son of God nullified all evidence that could have been cited against sinners, and in one glorious act of triumph, nailed the entire record to the cross, abrogating it forever.

This guaranteed freedom from all bondage. The accused had been found "not guilty" and was permitted to leave the courthouse. If people questioned the legality of the verdict, they were advised to look at

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Calvary's cross, for there, stained by the precious blood of the Redeemer, the evidence could be seen cancelled! Shackles upon the neck, hands, and feet of slaves were no longer permitted. God's Year of Jubilee had arrived; men could be free. The Lord Jesus in anticipation of that event said, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

"How much am I bid for him?" The auctioneer was eloquent, but the slave buyers only laughed, for the lad being offered in the Nigerian market was unquestionably ugly. His thin, frightened face had an appalling appearance, and the buyers seriously doubted their ability to find a market for such a child. The auctioneer tried again, but when no bid was forthcoming, the man sold the child for a roll of tobacco. Everybody laughed—this was fun, and it provided a little amusement amidst the more serious business of buying human beings.

Soon the ugly lad was walking along the forest paths which led to the coast. He was careful to keep up with the others, for the merciless traders knew how to use a whip! The journey seemed endless and sorrow filled his heart. His people and village lay far behind; ahead lay slavery and the unknown. He tramped on. When the sea came into sight, he wondered what new horrors awaited him, and fear again filled his soul when he was pushed aboard a ship and imprisoned below deck.

Then came the day when people seemed to be running all over the place. Voices were raised; something had gone wrong. British sailors had captured the ship; the evil traders were subdued. The vessel was brought into Freetown where the slaves were liberated. The boy was unable to fend for himself, so the authorities placed him in the care of nearby missionaries who adopted him, naming him Samuel. It seemed difficult for the child to believe these white people were kind when others had been cruel. The little boy heard about Christ, and eventually became a Christian. He was sent to school, and through diligent study progressed admirably with his lessons.

Years later, in the presence of a great audience in St. Paul's Cathedral in London, that same boy was consecrated to become the first Bishop of Nigeria. The lad who was sold for a roll of tobacco became Bishop Samuel Crowther, who did such a marvelous work for Christ in Africa. Today, he is still remembered

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as the man who brought the glorious Gospel to his people. Here was another Samuel, the boy who helped to save a nation. (Reprinted from the author's book, Bible Highways (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985, 38-39.)

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