

Meditations of the Heart - Reflections on the Scriptures

Psalm 19:14 Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

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Meditations of the Heart

The writing for this week's Meditations of the Heart comes from a two-volume book entitled "Letters of Faith Through the Seasons", compiled by Dr. James M Houston. Dr. Houston personally gave these books to me for the purpose of sharing some of these letters with you, the congregation of Faith Presbyterian Church, in the hope that we might obtain a greater appreciation for the devotion of the saints who have gone before us in centuries past.

This week's meditation comes from the words of someone you might have heard of: John Newton (1725-1807). Some have referred to Newton as the 18th century's version of Saul of Tarsus (see Acts 9). Newton's father was a sea captain who took his son to sea early in his boyhood. As a wild youth, Newton was engaged for a time on slave ships between West Africa and the Caribbean. He confessed his own lawlessness, saying: 'I lost all sense of religion and beauty and became deaf to the remonstrance of conscience and prudence.' From such an experience, he later wrote the hymn Amazing Grace. Along the same lines, Newton, as a mature pastor, wrote the following words to an inquirer explaining a right understanding of the Law of God.

Dear Sir,

You desire my thoughts on I Timothy 1:8, 'We know that the law is good if a man use it lawfully,' and I willingly comply. I do not intend to give you a sermon on this text, but a little attention to method may not be improper upon this subject, although given as a letter to a friend. Ignorance of the nature and design of the law is at the bottom of most religious mistakes. For this is the root of self-righteousness, the great reason why the gospel of Christ is no longer regarded, and the cause of so much uncertainty and inconsistency in many people, who though they profess themselves to be teachers, do not really understand what they are saying, nor what they are affirming...

The Law, in many passages of the Old Testament, signifies the whole revelation of God, as in Psalm 1:2 and 19:7. But the law in the strict sense of the term is contra-distinguished from the Gospel... as the apostle does in his epistles to the Romans and the Galatians...

The Law of God then, in the largest sense is that rule or prescribed course, which God has appointed for all his creatures, according to their several natures and capacities that they may answer the end for which he has created them... The Law of God in this sense, or what some may choose to call 'the law of nature,' is no other than the impression of God's power, whereby all things continue and act according to his will from the beginning. For 'he spoke, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast.'

But..., when God created mankind, he taught him more than the beasts of the earth, and wiser than the birds of the air. For he formed himself for himself, breathing into him an immortal spirit, incapable of dissolution, giving him a capacity not to be satisfied with any creature-good. He endowed him with an understanding, will, and affections, which qualified him for the knowledge and service of his Maker, and of a life of communion with him. The Law of God, therefore, concerning mankind, is that rule of disposition and conduct of which a human being is constituted and ought to conform...

But as man and woman was capable of understanding it, so they were capable of forsaking it. They did so and sinned, by eating of the forbidden fruit... Yet still the Law remained in force... The depravity they had brought upon human nature remained. Their children and all their posterity were born in their sinful likeness, without the ability or inclination to keep the Law. So the whole earth was soon filled with violence. But a few in every successive age were preserved by grace and faith in God's promise – Abraham – Moses – godly Israelites... But how can we know the law is good, if by our fallen nature we do not, nor can we think so...? For we cannot be at enmity with God, and at the same time approve of his law.

The Decalogue or Ten Commandments uttered by the voice of God is an abstract of the original Law under which mankind was created. But it was published in a prohibitory form, since the Israelites, like the rest of mankind, being depraved by sin, was strongly inclined to the commission of everything evil. This law could not be designed as a covenant, by obedience to which man could be justified. For long before its publication the Gospel had already been preached to Abraham (Galatians 3:8). But the law entered to expose sin, showing its extent and evil consequences, for it reaches to the most hidden thoughts of the heart, yet requires absolute and perpetual obedience, and denounces a curse upon all who continue in sin. To this was further added the ceremonial or Levitical law. This prescribed a variety of institutions, ceremonials purifications, and sacrifices, the observances of which were absolutely necessary to the acceptable worship of God. By obedience to these prescriptions, the people of Israel preserved their legal right to the blessings promised to them as a nation...

But Christ as the Lamb of God, who in the fullness of time came to take away the sin of the world by the sacrifice of himself, has done away with all need to keep the ceremonial law and its sacrifices. Now all other sacrifices, other than his own, became unnecessary and vain. The Gospel supplies the place of the ceremonial law.

Moreover, Christ has removed the enmity we naturally had against God and his Law, by the power of the Holy Spirit. For it is the Spirit's office to enlighten and convince the conscience; to communicate an impression of the majesty, holiness, justice and authority of the God with whom we have to do, and thus to understand the nature and seriousness of sin. The sinner is then stripped of all his vain pretenses, and compelled to plead guilty... But the office of the Holy Spirit is also to discover the grace and glory of the Savior, as having fulfilled the Law for us, as well as to enable us to honor the Law with a due personal obedience. Then a change of judgment takes place in us helping us to begin to see the Law is holy, just, and good. As holy, it manifests the holiness of God. Conformity to it is the fulfillment of our perfection as God originally purposed. Thus we begin to recognize that there can be no excellence in mankind, except as we are influenced by God's law.

Thought for the Day:

We need to discern the legitimacy of the law and the illegitimacy of legalism.

Prayer:

'You have laid down precepts that are to be fully obeyed. Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying your decrees.'

Psalm 119:4-5