

The Vision of Present Truth

Habakkuk. 2:2 "Write the **vision**, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it."

I grew up in the truth. When I attended the meetings as a small boy, I was always reminded of this scripture because I could see it on the Chart of the Ages which was displayed at our Sunday meetings. As a child I thought the chart **was** the "vision" mentioned in Habakkuk and that Brother Russell was the one who wrote it down.

Bro. Russell first printed the chart in the September 1881 *Zion's Watch Tower*, five years before the first volume appeared. He felt the chart was a good way to visually understand the great plan of God from the creation of man through the ages to come. He wrote, "We know of nothing which would give you so clear a conception of the plan of God."¹ Later in life I came to realize the vision is much, much more than the Chart of the Ages.

Bro. Russell died more than 80 years ago. There are few people alive who have seen him with their own eyes. Although we read about the great enthusiasm for witnessing and Bible study that energized the brethren during his ministry, it seems like a long time ago. To some the "vision" Bro. Russell saw and communicated does not seem as energizing as it once was. Important doctrines he emphasized are not always as appreciated today as they were then.

Hebrews 2:1 "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip."

We are Bible Students. Why should it matter what Bro. Russell taught, or what was taught by the many great teachers we've had in all our lands? It matters because studying the Bible is not enough. Without a basic understanding of the plan of God—without an understanding of "the vision"—we can't understand what's in the Bible. You're here because you (or someone who taught you) first learned the basics of God's plan from Bro. Russell's writings. Bro. Russell was not just another writer; he was not just another commentator whose opinion on scripture was as good as but no better than any other. He was uniquely used by the Lord at the end of this Gospel Age to cleanse the church of the corrupting errors accumulated through the centuries, and to proclaim to the footstep followers of the Master that it was time to come out of "Babylon." Today the Chart of the Ages is recognized throughout the world as a symbol for those who believe as most of us do. It is our common understanding of the "vision" that allows us to unite our hearts and minds in fellowship with others of like precious faith throughout the world.

What was the "vision" of truth that Bro. Russell saw and communicated to us?

Habakkuk 2:1 "I will stand upon my watch, and fix my foot upon the **Tower**, and I will **watch** to see what will be said to me."

¹ R294, Oct. 1882

Bro. Russell was born in 1852. In July 1879, at the age of 27, he published the first issue of *Zion's Watch Tower*. Perhaps it was Habakkuk 2:1 that provided the inspiration for the title of that periodical.

Christ's Second Presence

But *Zion's Watch Tower* was not its only title. The cover also contained the words *Herald of Christ's Presence*. The first article in the first issue was on the subject of Christ's second advent. An article in the second issue emphasized that this is an invisible presence which precedes the Millennium. In the October issue an article by J. H. Paton argued that this invisible presence occurred in 1874.

This was a revolutionary concept. Christendom then as now expected the second advent. William Miller thought the scriptures clearly indicated that Christ would return in 1844. It didn't happen. But Miller's preaching triggered an interest in the subject of Christ's second presence. Paton, Russell, and others came to the conclusion that the world would never see Christ again with their literal eyes. The second presence had to be invisible.

Believing that Christ is invisibly present now makes us unique among Christians. I doubt that there are any Christian groups whose roots are not in the writings of Bro. Russell who believe the Lord is present now. These words are from the Reprints, bottom of page 735:

“In October, 1883, the question was asked through the Tower: “Are there any other papers than the Tower which teach as it does, that Jesus is now present?” And the answer was given: “We know of none other which teaches the personal presence of Christ Jesus,” etc. If any reader knows of any journal which up to and at that date taught the presence of our Lord, they will confer a favor by sending us a copy of such paper with the article containing such teaching marked. We feel sure, that the above answer was correct.”

A belief in the invisible presence of our Lord is part of this “vision.”

Ransom for All

Bro. Russell was absolutely convinced that the Bible taught that Jesus Christ died for all, whether anyone believed it or not, and whether they agreed with his understanding of the Bible or not. Believing in a ransom for all also made him unique in the Christian world. Today most Christians still believe that salvation is limited to those who agree with their understanding of the scriptures.

Bro. Russell was surprised that those with whom he initially cooperated, like Brothers Barbour and Paton, eventually rejected this doctrine. When they did, Bro. Russell immediately stopped cooperating with them. To him there could be no compromising this doctrine. He continually emphasized the primacy of the scriptures as our only creed.

quote—“Beware of and reject every theory which rejects the ransom, even though it adheres to the name Christian and quotes from the Bible.”—*unquote* [R895, Oct. 1886]

If all that are within their graves are to come forth, then it follows that the dead are not being tormented eternally in hell. This was said in the very first issue of the Watch Tower. The Bible hell is simply oblivion—death. It was an unconventional message in its time; today it seems less so. His was truly a “Gospel message” [meaning “good news”]. It stood in contrast to the “bad news” being preached by everyone else. Because all died in Adam; **all** will come back in the kingdom through Christ.

Think about the Christian community around you. Who teaches that mankind will be resurrected back to perfect human life right here on earth where they will be instructed in righteousness? Who teaches that the atheists, the Buddhists, the Mohammedans, the Confucians, the worshippers of Baal, or a 1000-and-one other false gods will all come back to life because there will be a resurrection of the dead? Not one that I know of. That first issue of *Zion’s Watch Tower* referred to what would become a favorite text of Bible Students:

Acts 3:19-21 "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began."

A ransom for all and a restitution of all things forms a part of the vision communicated to us by Bro. Russell. It is a precious part of our heritage.

Why God Permits Evil

Few within the Christian community can answer the question, “If God is all powerful, why does he permit evil to flourish in the world?” The lead article in the second issue of the *Watch Tower* answered that question and it involves restitution. If this were to be the only life mankind will ever live, then there is no answer to the question.

Matthew 11:23 "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day."

So why weren’t such mighty works done in Sodom? Was it right to destroy Sodom without giving them a chance to repent? Yes it was because their chance is yet future in the kingdom. Mankind is receiving its education in **un**righteousness now; its education in righteous will take place in the kingdom when they come back to life on earth.

Knowing why God permits evil to flourish is a part of this “vision.” You know it; most of your Christian friends do not.

The Tabernacle

There were many articles on the various offerings of Leviticus and on the Tabernacle in the Watch Tower during the early years.² Bro. W. I. Mann authored many of them. Bro. Paton, in Oct. 1880 wrote about the scapegoat (R150). Because Bro. Paton rejected the idea that the Great Company was a spiritual class, Bro. Russell followed Paton's article with a note reaffirming his belief that it was.

The meaning of the typical sacrifices of Israel and their entire Tabernacle arrangement thrilled Bro. Russell. He writes about his experience in study and meditation on this subject. (R3824) The first book he authored and published was *Tabernacle Shadows*. It was published in 1881 when Bro. Russell was 29 years old. A diagram of the Tabernacle was also placed to the right of the Chart of the Ages when it was first published in 1881.

An appreciation of the types and shadows in ancient Israel and the lessons they teach spiritual Israel was communicated to us by Bro. Russell. Few among our Christian friends have any interest in nor do they draw any spiritual lessons from a study of this subject.

An understanding of the types and shadows of the Old Testament is an important part of the "vision" we have received through the ministry of Bro. Russell.

Israel

In March 1880 in an article entitled "Jewish Restoration," Bro. Russell wrote:

quote—"We believe that fleshly Israel will, in the near future, be recognized as the chief nation of earth."*—unquote*

Bro. Russell believed and taught that Israel's period of disfavor was drawing to a close and that favor would return to them. In the chart of the ages which he published the following year, part of the pyramid showing the completed work of the kingdom is labelled ISRAEL RESTORED. It is placed higher than the part representing the world of mankind.

Most of Christendom has little interest in Israel or if they regard Israel at all, it is simply as another mission field to be conquered for Christ. That's because they have taken all the promises God made to Israel and given them a spiritual interpretation. The fact that Israel has been regathered from the four corners of the earth into their own land is ignored. The fact that Israel has been providentially protected since their establishment as a nation in 1948 has also been ignored.

But Israel is God's chosen people. He is specially guiding their affairs and protecting them.

Jeremiah 46:28 "Fear thou not, O Jacob my servant, saith the Lord: for I am with thee; for I will make a full end of all the nations whither I have driven thee:

² Feb. '80, *The Law Shadows*, talks about the typical sacrifices and what they mean. Mar. '80, *The Great Day of Atonement*. May '80, *The Sin Offering*. July '80, *The Tabernacle*.

but I will not make a full end of thee, but correct thee in measure; yet will I not leave thee wholly unpunished.”

Bro. Russell never wavered in his support for Israel. The high point came on October 9, 1910, when he spoke to 4,000 Jews gathered in New York’s Hippodrome. In his discourse he advocated the establishment of a Jewish nation. He never lived to see it. We have. He spoke “comfortably to Jerusalem, that her warfare is accomplished” (Isaiah 40:2). Few of our Christian friends do so today.

Recognizing Israel’s place in the plan of God is a part of this “vision.”

The Volumes

Virtually all the important elements of the “vision” were communicated by Bro. Russell in the first few years of the *Watch Tower*. As time went by, much of what he wrote became available in six volumes entitled “Studies in the Scriptures.”

Volume 1—1886. It described the primacy and importance of the Bible; our Lord’s return; the permission of evil; ransom and restitution; the chart of the ages; the kingdom of God contrasted with the kingdoms of this world; and the coming great time of trouble.

Volume 2—1889. Bible chronology; Daniel’s 70 weeks; Times of the Gentiles; the manner of our Lord’s return; The Man of Sin. From the foreword: “The Times of the Gentiles ended in the fall of AD 1914.” Bro. Russell says he has been preaching this for over 40 years. Historians are united in their judgment that 1914 was an unprecedented year in earth’s history. Historian Barbara Tuchman said, “A world came to an end in 1914.” In an editorial, *The Seattle Times*, January 1, 1959, wrote: “The modern era . . . began in 1914 and no one knows when or how it will end. . . . It could end in mass annihilation.”

Volume 3—1890. This book describes God’s kingdom including the preparation work required for it. One chapter describes the restoration of Israel. From the foreword: “The Great Pyramid has not lost any of its interest to the author.” Even as early as May 1881, he said he had “great respect” for the Great Pyramid, and called it a “Miracle in Stone.”

Volume 4—1897. The Battle of Armageddon, the downfall of Babylon, and the establishment of the kingdom.

Volume 5—1899. From the foreword: “The keynote of this volume is the Ransom-price.”

Volume 6—1904. The New Creation along with notes on baptism, the Memorial, marriage, parenting, and other obligations.

Bro. Russell Himself

If we had more time, we could continue to describe various elements of the “vision” Bro. Russell saw so clearly and communicated to those with ears to hear. How did he himself come to understand it? The same way our elders come to understand the truths they give

us from this platform. They did **not** talk with some divine messenger who told them what to say. They **did** study the scriptures and considered the thoughts of others to see whether these things are true or not.

Bro. Russell said at the age of 16 he had been a consecrated child of God for some years. He said he “stumbled” upon Adventism and “confessed indebtedness to Adventists.” He was influenced by Jonas Wendell, George Stetson, George Storrs, Nelson Barbour, J. H. Paton, and others. What mattered most to Bro. Russell was doctrines that could be proved from the Bible. He claimed “as a faithful student of the Word of God, to be an index finger . . . to help [us] trace for ourselves, on the sacred page, the wonderful plan of God.” (R3821)

Let us never forget this. Millions have studied the Bible yet they do not understand what it teaches. Errors from the past cloud their minds; they see no “vision” of God’s plan to bless the world of mankind. Others feel the books written by their leaders are far more important than the Bible so they only study those books. Even among our own fellowship some classes study only the Bible; other classes study only the writings of Bro. Russell. While studying a volume is one method of Bible study—a topical study of the scriptures—to say that it replaces direct Bible study is an error. The Bible itself is the word of God. If we call ourselves Bible Students, we should not be afraid to study it.

When asked what name those who were associated with Bro. Russell called themselves, he replied that we were strictly nonsectarian. He went on:

“We have no creed (fence) to bind us together or to keep others out of our company. The Bible is our only standard, and its teachings our only creed. . . . We are in fellowship with all Christians in whom we can recognize the Spirit of Christ, and especially with those who recognize the Bible as the only standard. We do not require, therefore, that all shall see, just as we do in order to be called Christians.” (R344, April 1882)

Let us never feel we must force conformity of thought among brethren. When one differs with Bro. Russell’s interpretation of scripture, he should be free to give the reasons for the difference. However, there is a serious problem when one **does not know** what Bro. Russell’s interpretation is. We are deceived if we think we can study the Bible by ourselves and come to an accurate knowledge of what it teaches without the help of others. This does not mean we are “following a man.” Everything we learn comes from others through the spoken and written word. Of course the Lord leads us, but he does it through human agencies. It has always been that way. The Ethiopian eunuch knew that. When asked by Philip if he understood what he read, he replied: “How can I, except some **man** should guide me?” (Acts 8:31)

If you want to understand the truth, study Bro. Russell’s writings. Learn about his “vision” of God’s great plan of salvation. If Bro. Russell says something you think is wrong, be prepared with the scriptures that lead you to that conclusion. Check your scriptures against his, then reconcile the differences. This is Bible study within the framework of the

truth the Lord has given us through Bro. Russell's ministry. If you don't have the right framework, you won't be able to appreciate the teachings of the Bible. And what is that framework?

- Our God is a God of love. He does have a plan to bless the human race.
- The foundation of His plan is the death of the perfect man Jesus Christ which provides a ransom for all whether they know it or not.
- The dead are really dead. But there will be a future kingdom of righteousness when all who have died will be brought back to life.
- Those who devote their lives to God during this age will receive a heavenly resurrection permitting them to bring blessings to everyone else in the kingdom upon the earth.
- Evil will not exist forever. It will be destroyed along with those who practice evil at the end of the kingdom.

This is so clear, so reasonable, so like a wise and loving God. Blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear. We should be enthusiastic when we share our "vision" with the world around us.

Near the end of his life, in the year 1914, Bro. Russell began his greatest witness effort ever: "The Photodrama of Creation." It took two years to prepare. Slides plus motion pictures in tinted color with sound from phonograph records were shown to thousands to bring them the message of God's plan. It was the most advanced communication technology of its time. I would now like you to see Bro. Russell as he appeared on film introducing the second part of the Photo Drama. His voice was recorded on phonograph records:

—*BEGIN video projection*—

"We have seen and heard part first of the Photo Drama of Creation. We hope that as a result, our reverence for our great Creator is increased. The Bible story of the fall of Father Adam, under the curse or sentence of death, may we never forget. The reign of sin and death, and its power and influence, even upon angels, leading up to the deluge, we have fixed in our memory. God's oath-bound covenant with Abraham we have seen to be the basis of all the resurrection hope. Our interest in God, and in the Bible, and in our fellows, increases as we gain a broader view of creation. It is for this reason that our patrons declare each part of the Drama the best.

"Let us keep in memory the great fact that creation is not yet complete. The completed creation will find our earth a paradise and filled with a perfect and happy human family in harmony with the Creator. Thereafter, there shall be no more sin, sorrow, sighing or dying. The curse of death will have been rolled away by the redeemer and the blessing of God will

be upon all—everlasting life; for all willful sinners will have been destroyed in the second death.

"Part second begins with Melchisedec, priest and king, the supposed builder of the Great Pyramid. It will show us Moses, God's typical dealings with typical Israel, the exodus, crossing the Red Sea, giving of the Mount Sinai law, the manna, the tabernacle and its sacrifices, and other wilderness experiences, the death and burial of Moses, Israel's crossing Jordan, Joshua's battles, Israel's kings—Saul, David, Solomon; Solomon's temple, Elisha, Elijah, Israel's last king—Zedekiah, concluding with the beautiful and touching film, "The Shunamite's Son." It illustrates the Divine power back of Messiah's coming kingdom, when all that are in their graves shall be called forth, and when sin and death will end."

—*END video projection*—

Let us also be committed to witnessing to others using all the available technologies we have today. If the Lord blesses our efforts, we rejoice. If there is no fruitage, it doesn't matter. Let us do with our might what our hands find to do in the vineyard of the Lord.

May the Lord help us remain faithful to the "vision" of truth he has given to each one of us. May it never be said of us that we let slip the things we have heard.

Amen.

[First given at the 1998 International Convention, Miskolc, Hungary]