



Discussions with My Friend: An Introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ By David Stewart

Chapter 36: The Universal Gospel: Choice and Responsibility

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Gospel Taught from the Beginning

After Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden to be tested and to live by the sweat of their brow, the Lord sent messengers to teach the everlasting gospel to Adam and his posterity. "A book of remembrance was kept, in the which was recorded, in the language of Adam, for it was given unto as many as called upon God to write by the spirit of inspiration. And by them their children were taught to read and write, having a language which was pure and undefiled" ([Moses 6:5-6](#)). Although anthropologists claim widespread illiteracy for the ancients, findings do not support this claim. Cuneiform scholar C.B.F. Walker observed, "... if one digs in a town of the Old Babylonian period, it seems that one can find a few [inscribed] tablets in almost every house. Small private libraries existed at all periods ..." [[1](#)] The earliest human writing appears fully developed, consistent with the scriptural record.

From the time of Adam and Eve until the tower of Babel, "the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech" ([Genesis 11:1](#)). Increasing numbers of linguists are coming to recognize that human languages were not invented independently, but originated from a common source, and that the original language was more complex than its modern descendants. Numerous scholars have observed close correspondence between the earliest forms of Egyptian, Semitic, and Sumerian. In 1930, L.A. Waddell observed that "Egyptian hieroglyphs are a slightly modified conventional form of the Sumerian diagrammatic picture-writing ... they have the same phonetic values as their parent picture-signs in the Sumerian." [[2](#)] With Egyptian hieroglyphs and Sumerian texts having the same sounds and meanings in the very earliest period, we have a single language written in different scripts until the confusion of tongues.

Yet "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually ... The earth was filled with violence, for all flesh had corrupted [God's] way upon the earth" ([Genesis 6:5, 11-12](#)). The earth was cleansed in the great deluge, which is remembered with some variation in more than 200 flood legends among world cultures.

God Works Among All People

Even after the miraculous deliverance of Noah and his family, his descendants fell into apostasy. Yet God continued to perform his work among men, calling to repentance those with ears to hear.

The plan of salvation is for all people. The Book of Mormon prophet Ammon declared: "God is mindful of every people, whatsoever land they may be in; yea, he numbereth his people, and his bowels of mercy are over all the earth" ([Alma 26:37](#)). Saint Peter observed: "God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted [of] him" ([Acts 10:34-35](#)). God told Moses: "This is the plan of salvation unto all men, through the blood of mine Only Begotten, who shall come in the meridian of time" ([Moses 6:62](#)).

The Book of Mormon declares that Christ is the eternal God, manifesting himself to all nations. The prophet Alma taught: "The Lord doth grant unto all nations, of their own nation and tongue, to teach his word ... in wisdom, all that he seeth fit that they should have" ([Alma 29:8](#)). Christ declared: "I shall ... speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it" ([2 Nephi 29:12](#)).

We know of the history of the covenant people of Israel in the Bible and the Book of Mormon. What of the others? I will recount two of the innumerable examples of the work of God among the other people of the earth.

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Socrates

One man, pondering his pending execution on trumped-up charges, explained to his friends why he faced the imminent return to his maker with joy rather than apprehension. He taught of the immortality of the soul, the coming judgment, the eternal nature of the family, and the joy of the righteous. He taught that knowledge acquired before we were born -- the innate knowledge between good and evil which we refer to as the conscience -- proves that the soul is immortal. He declared:

Our souls must have existed before they were in the form of man -- without bodies, and must have had intelligence ... Are we to suppose that the soul, which is invisible, in passing to the true [world of spirits], which like her is invisible, and pure, and noble, and on her way to the good and wise God ... is blown away and perishes immediately on quitting the body as the many say? In this present life, I reckon that we make the nearest approach to knowledge when we ... remain pure until the hour when God himself is pleased to release us. And then the foolishness of the body will be cleared away and we shall be pure and ... converse with other pure souls, and know of ourselves the clear light everywhere; and this is surely the light of truth. For no impure thing is allowed to approach the pure ... But the soul which has been polluted, and is impure at the time of her departure -- do you suppose that such a soul will depart pure and unalloyed? ... But he who is a [lover of wisdom] or lover of learning, and is entirely pure at departing, is alone permitted to reach the gods. And this is the reason ... why the true votaries of [wisdom] abstain from all fleshly lusts, and endure and refuse to give themselves up to them. Those too who have been pre-eminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth; and of these, such as have duly purified themselves with [the love of wisdom] live henceforth ... in mansions fairer still which may not be described, and of which the time would fail me to tell.

We can recognize in this passage numerous gospel doctrines taught with insight and clarity surpassing that of contemporary Christian theologians. Yet these are not the words of a scriptural prophet or apostle, but of the Greek philosopher Socrates as recorded by his disciples in the dialogue *Phaedo*. Each of these principles he taught diverged from the core beliefs of his society.

The Greeks, like many other nations, had lost their writing system at the end of the Bronze Age and with it the knowledge of their prior history and origins. They regained writing only centuries later by modifying the Phoenician alphabet. Yet even among these people, who had lost knowledge of ancient scripture through apostasy, God called men like Socrates through inspiration to teach a portion of his word. They held no priesthood or administrative authority, but they were still inspired by God through the light of Christ. Not all of Socrates' teachings are precisely accurate, yet it is remarkable how closely they correspond to scriptural truths in the areas that are most important.

Confucius

Another great teacher taught:

"To put the world in order we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right." "The perfecting of one's self is the fundamental base of all progress and all moral development." "Think no vice so small that you may commit it, and no virtue so small that you may overlook it." "The superior man will watch over himself when he is alone. He examines his heart that there may be nothing wrong there, and that he may have no cause of dissatisfaction with himself." "Wisdom, compassion and courage -- these are the three universally recognized moral qualities of men." "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it." "Absolute truth is indestructible. Being indestructible, it is eternal. Being eternal, it is self-existent. Being self-existent, it is infinite. Being infinite, it is vast and deep. Being vast and deep, it is transcendental and intelligent."

This was Confucius, whose analects have served as the foundation of moral order in Chinese society for two and a half millennia, and kept relative peace in the largest nation on earth at a time when the Western world was consumed by nearly perpetual war. Contemporary readers of Confucius' work will recognize many gospel principles. Yet Confucius, like Socrates, did not claim credit for his work. He declared: "I add nothing. I merely transmit," acknowledging as his source the teachings of the fathers handed down from the beginning of time, and the divine light within.

Jesus Christ: God of All the Earth

During his ministry, Christ proclaimed: "Behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues" ([Matthew 23:34](#)). In so doing, he identified himself as the power who has sent into the world from the beginning holy teachers who have proclaimed his word unto men in all generations and among all nations. He is the God not only of prophets of scripture like Abraham and Moses, but of wise men like Socrates and Confucius, and of the scribes who have preserved and transmitted inspired teachings.

From Socrates and Confucius, we learn the great unity of the gospel message in recognizing that sound logic, perceptive observation, conscience, and the Holy Spirit all direct us to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The spiritual, the mental, and the physical are not conflicting elements, but are all harmonious parts of the universal whole of the gospel. Yet only those with moral purity are able to attain to such insights, or even to understand them.

All things Denote God

The Book of Mormon prophet Alma's words still echo today: "all things denote there is a God ... even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it ... and its motion ... and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator" ([Alma 30:44](#)). Many scholars today attempt to show through sophistry that God does not exist, yet these same scholars are unable to adequately account for natural phenomena, such the missing two-thirds of the universe's matter ("Dark Matter") and the missing three-quarters of the universe's energy ("Dark Energy") that scientific theory predicts should be there, but can not be detected with our most sophisticated equipment. The measured locations of the stars and planets are never quite where theory would predict them to be. The earth slows down and speeds up on its axis without apparent explanation. Natural systems tend toward disorder. Over time, minute inefficiencies and accumulated discrepancies would have led to the planets drifting away from the sun and the solar system falling apart, yet regulating forces beyond our comprehension correct such discrepancies and maintain the earth in its orbit. Contemporary science would predict a universe which is winding down and dying, yet the universe is expanding and new star systems continue to be born. The solar system, and the universe in general, demonstrate dynamic properties of growth and self-regulation that are characteristic of living organisms or very complex machines rather than of matter chaotically thrown into space.

Nearly three millennia ago, the Psalmist wrote: "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" ([Psalms 14:1](#)). Even today, God's hand in the universe is seen by those who are not merely learned, but wise and pure.

God has Appointed Man's Time and Place

God has appointed each person his time and place. Saint Paul taught the Athenians:

"God ... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us: For in him we live, and move, and have our being ... For we are also his offspring" ([Acts 17:24-28](#))

Yet great inequality exists in the world. Some individuals have great opportunity and others have little. In the Doctrine and Covenants, the Lord declared: "It is not given that one man should possess that which is above another, wherefore the world lieth in sin" ([D&C 49:20](#)) ... "It is not right that any man should be in bondage one to another" ([D&C 101:79](#)).

The World's Moral Problem

Our world's problems are not primarily social, economic, or political, but moral. The violence in the Middle East today is not the inevitable consequence of sectarian differences, but rather reflects a complete breakdown in the moral fiber of society when individuals believe that they are justified in depriving of life, liberty, and property those who do not believe just as they do. The corruption which impedes the progress of much of the world arises from ethical failure with individuals placing self-interest above principles of equity, justice, and consideration of their fellow man. The Apostle Paul declared: "For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's" ([Philippians 2:21](#)).

Earthly Inequity and Divine Justice

Compared to the state of most of mankind, all of us here have been abundantly blessed. In our nation, most individuals can expect to live a long and productive life, barring tragic mishap or rare affliction, and we are free to choose our course in life. Through much of history, it was a considerable feat for a child to survive to adulthood, and freedom is a rare gift that has been afforded relatively few. Power, not freedom, is the universal value of history. So why are some people born in favorable conditions while others come to earth in less fortunate circumstances?

Christ answered this question through numerous stories. "His disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind? Jesus answered, Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" ([John 9:2-3](#)). Reciting a contemporary tragedy, he taught that random suffering is not the consequence of sin: "Those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" ([Luke 13:5-6](#)). He recounted the parable of Lazarus and the rich man:

"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day, and there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift[ed] up his eyes, being in torment" ([Luke 16:19-23](#)).

The rich man failed to impart of his substance. Yet nothing in the story attests to the moral character of the poor man. Christ's purpose in recounting this parable appears to have been the teaching of the principle of compensation. Those deprived of means or opportunities through no fault of their own will have it made up to them in the hereafter. The Lord declared: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" ([Luke 12:48](#)).

The ancient Pharisees thought that their favored status as God's chosen people reflected their superiority to others. They were

wrong. Christ warned the self-righteous Pharisees:

"[many] shall come from the east, and from the west, and from the north, and from the south, and shall sit down in the kingdom of God" ([Luke 13:29](#)) "but [many of] the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness" ([Matthew 8:12](#))

Premortal Covenants, Mortal Responsibility

The Savior further recounted the parable of the two sons:

"But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first" ([Matthew 21:28-31](#)).

This is a parable of the preexistence and mortal life. We came into this world by different covenants. Some of us, like the first son, promised to do the Lord's work here on the earth and were born in favorable circumstances, yet many who made such promises fail to fulfill them while upon the earth. Others, like the second son, made no such promise, but during earth life repent, convert to the Church, and do the Lord's will. Our promises in the preexistence will not save us at judgment day. Our conduct in this life will determine the extent to which we ultimately experience the blessings of the Savior's atonement, as "many that are first shall be last; and the last first" ([Mark 10:31](#)).

Our situation in mortality does not reflect any superiority or greater valiance than of our fellow men. It reflects only that we promised to do more, and thus are held to a higher standard. We have been blessed with great opportunities, and it behooves each of us to use those opportunities to bless our fellow men through the wise use of our talents, and to strive to reach our full potential.

Knowing that we will be held to more stringent account because of our greater blessings, one may wonder: why would we have wanted to come to earth at this time and place and face greater accountability?

The Apostle Paul answered this question: "What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision?" In other words, what is the advantage of being a member of God's covenant people and obeying His ordinances? Paul continued: "Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God" ([Romans 3:1-2](#)). As members of the Savior's church, we have access to God's direct instructions through ancient scripture and living prophets. We can know God's will without doubt and can enter sacred covenants which, if kept, will ensure our salvation through the mediation of Christ's atonement. This path requires affirmative choice and effort, yet it offers the most direct path to God and provides the greatest opportunity for us to bless the lives of others.

This contrasts with the state of those who live without the oracles of God, as described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "I pondered ... on the sad fate of mortals, adrift upon this sea of human opinions, without compass or rudder, and abandoned to their stormy passions with no guide but an inexperienced pilot who does not know whence he comes or whither he is going." Christ taught the essential nature of discipleship with God's covenant people to the Samaritan woman: "Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews [or covenant people] ... and they that worship [God] must worship him in spirit and in truth" ([John 4:22-23](#)).

A Just Judgment

Those without opportunities to receive the gospel in this life will be judged by their conscience and circumstance. Saint Paul wrote:

"There is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law ... For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these ... are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another; In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel" ([Romans 2:11-12, 14-16](#)).

The Book of Mormon prophet Alma observed:

"good and evil have come before all men; he that knoweth not good from evil is blameless; but he that knoweth good and evil, to him it is given according to his desires, whether he desireth good or evil, life or death, joy or remorse of conscience" ([Alma 29:5](#)).

Christ taught, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the father, but by me" ([John 14:6](#)). Those who did not have an opportunity to learn of Christ in this life will receive an opportunity hereafter. Saint Peter wrote,

"For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison" ([1 Peter 3:18-19](#)). "... for this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit" ([1 Peter 4:6](#)).

All Expected to Come to Christ

All are expected to come to Christ in His Church, even with varying backgrounds and difficult personal situations. Christ taught: "And the whole world lieth in sin, and groaneth under darkness and under the bondage of sin. And by this you may know they are under the bondage of sin, because they come not unto me. For whoso cometh not unto me is under the bondage of sin. And whoso receiveth not my voice is not acquainted with my voice, and is not of me" ([D&C 84:49-53](#)). We all have choice. Even those raised in difficult circumstances have the opportunity to choose the right in their own lives. Mahatma Gandhi stated: "I have ... seen children successfully surmounting the effect of an evil inheritance. That is due to purity being an inherent attribute of the soul."

The days of ignorance are past. An era of opportunity has arrived in which the gospel is proclaimed in all the world, and all will be held to account. Saint Paul declared: "The times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness" ([Acts 17:30-31](#)).

May we all choose the right in our daily lives.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Walker, C.B.F., Cuneiform, Univ. Calif. Press/British Museum, 1987, 38.

[2] Waddell, L.A., Egyptian Civilization Its Sumerian Origin And Real Chronology, Luzac & Company, 1930, preface.