

The Word Is Very Near You

Dale Pauls

Near the end of the ancient book of Deuteronomy there is a most remarkable passage. It would be remarkable entirely on its own, but in its context it's all the more significant. In its final form Deuteronomy dates, most scholars believe, from the sixth century BC, but reinforced by centuries of compelling oral traditions it asks the reader to visualize Moses on the Plains of Moab (let's say in 1250 BC), an old man, one hundred and twenty years old. In format the book of Deuteronomy is a series of farewell speeches by Moses delivered with the intent to create a godly society on earth. God through Moses is taking a slave race, the Hebrews, just forty years removed from centuries of slavery in the land of Egypt, and from them, God seeks to form a society that in everything it does and in every way it structures itself is godly. And much of the text lends itself to legal application, and has been so understood across the ages.

With this in mind, consider Deuteronomy 30:11-14:

Now what I am commanding you today
is not too difficult for you
or beyond your reach.
It is not up in heaven,
so that you have to ask,
“Who will ascend into heaven to get it
and proclaim it to us
so we may obey it?”
Nor is it beyond the sea,
so that you have to ask,
“Who will cross the sea to get it
and proclaim it to us
so that we may obey it?”
No, the word is very near you;
it is in your mouth
and in your heart
so you may obey it.

This is one of the most remarkable texts in Scripture. What it's saying to its readers is that sections of Scripture, the legal sections, may seem like endless regulations, but in the end, what Scripture is teaching is what you already know to be true in your heart if you would just stop and look and see. In this sense, encountering the presence of God, in this case, encountering God's word, God's will, is not all that difficult. It's very near you. Just look inside your heart.

So, yes, Scripture can be complicated. It's not always simple. It lends itself to multiple perspectives and diverse understandings. Historical context matters. And often Scripture is dialectical; that is, it offers point and counterpoint, driving us to synthesis, to taking point and counterpoint and from them finding the transcendent idea, the higher idea, and

so learning to think, wrestling with the text, wrestling with God and God wrestling with us. And there is a moral trajectory to Scripture, a developmental flow from Genesis to the Gospels, from creation to Christ and beyond. So we see it not just for what it says as for what it morally implies over time, perhaps over centuries. On the level of doctrine, theology, dogma and metaphysics all of this is true.

And yet having said all this, what really matters in Scripture, what God wants from you, is “very near you.” It’s in your mouth and in your heart. It’s what you already know to be true in your heart. What this asks of us is to trust our God-given and God-focused intuition. I was raised to distrust my intuition. I was theologically trained to trust only logic – the cold hard facts – never my heart. I was raised wrong. I was trained wrong. So over time I have learned to trust my intuition, my God-given and God-focused intuition, that is, intuition that takes God into account. Now, I am not being whimsical here. I am not encouraging whimsicality. I’m not suggesting we trust our whims, but I am suggesting we learn to trust our intuition.

This calls for integrity, for stopping and looking and seeing, for seeing things as they really are and not just as we might wish them to be or feel they ought to be. We cannot mistake our fantasies, as we often do, for reality. And we cannot get trapped, we cannot get stuck, in attachments, in those things, persons or outcomes that we feel we cannot be happy without, that we feel we just have to have. That’s blindness and the very opposite of intuition.

But intuition is marvelous. It comes from God, and leads back to God. Ralph Waldo Emerson in his landmark essay on “Self-Reliance” (1841) laments that typically we dismiss without notice our own thoughts, because, well, after all, they’re just ours. And then, Emerson says, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts.” I believe all this is what Jesus was referring to when the night before his crucifixion he told his followers (in John 16:13) that the Spirit of truth will guide us into all the truth. He was saying, and we will look at this in greater length later, that if we remain in him (John 15:4,5,7), if we embody him, if we learn to see things as Jesus saw them, if his words remain in us (John 15:7), if we remain in his love (John 15:9,10), if we love each other (John 15:17), we will be guided into all truth. We can increasingly trust our intuition, trust our “hunches,” trust our grasp of reality, and trust our hearts.

And in the end, it will be love that will guide us into all truth. On one moral issue after another, there are formulas that make ever so much sense in abstraction until you meet the real live person facing that issue. And those formulas by and large are not the truth, or at least not all the truth. The truth is what you do with those formulas after you begin to really love.

Do not miss that the heart is a very fine place to find truth, if you factor God in, if you act with integrity, if you go down deep enough, to the kind of knowledge the heart knows, like: What is really loving? What is really honorable? What is really driving me? What is really in the best interest of others? For that matter, what is really in my best interest? And if this were done to me, would I find it to be kind and caring? It’s all pretty basic

stuff. It's for this reason that Jesus typically began his teaching with words that imply, "Who of you doesn't already know this?" It's very near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart. It's what you already know to be true in your heart.

May you today get in touch with God's will, God's word, for you. It's not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It's not up in heaven. It's not beyond the sea. It's very near you. It's in your mouth and in your heart. It's what you already know to be true in your heart. And may you encounter the presence of the living God who is all around you and in you.

– Dale Pauls