

The Word of God Is Able and Profitable

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From my earliest remembrance of the content of Gospel sermons, God-fearing men have exalted the inspired, written Word of God (the New Testament specifically) as the “road map” to Heaven. Mind you, faithful brethren have not set it forth as one among a few or many others, but as the **only** way by which sinners may reach eternal glory. Nor have any faithful men preached it as insufficient to save by itself, requiring any sort of additional force to be joined with it for its saving potential to be realized. The books and articles our brethren have written, when they touched on this subject, have almost unanimously taught the same message, and for good reason: This doctrine has its firm basis in what the Bible says about itself. Among many such passages, Acts 20:32 and 2 Timothy 3:16–17 serve as explicit cornerstones of this doctrine. These are worthy of our reconsideration and reemphasis.

When Paul delivered what he expected to be his final farewell to the Ephesian elders, he included the following commendation:

And now I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you the inheritance among all them that are sanctified (Acts 20:32).

Note that Paul styles the inspired Word (not yet completed in written form at the time he spoke these words, but nonetheless true) “the word of his [God’s] grace.” What an apt description! It is the “word of his grace” because God’s Grace motivated and provided it. It is also the “word of his grace” because it reveals the grace of God by which men can be saved (Tit. 2:11). Furthermore, Paul’s description of the inspired Word is appropriate because it reveals the means of our access to that grace.

Paul spoke these words to men who had obviously sometime earlier obeyed the Gospel and had matured sufficiently to be appointed as elders. They were already in God’s grace, but they would need to be strong enough to persevere in faithfulness to receive the promised inheritance. What help was available for all the saints and able to bring them to Heaven at last? Paul told those brethren (and all Christians by extension) that the “word of his grace” could do so. The Greek word behind *able* in this passage is *dunamai*, meaning power, ability, or sufficient strength. One can easily see how we derive such English words as *dynamo*, *dynamite*, and *dynamic* from this term. Paul used this same word in Romans 1:16 to say that the Gospel is the **power** of God to save believers.

Paul not only says that the Word is able, but he specifies two things it has the power—the sufficient strength—to do: First, it is “able to build you [saints] up.” The single Greek word

translated *build you up*, when used literally, refers to the construction of a building on a foundation already laid. Paul employs this word as a vivid figure for the process of growth and maturity in the faith that must characterize God's people if we are to enter Heaven. Thayer's comment is instructive regarding Paul's application of this term in this passage: "To promote growth in Christian wisdom, affection, grace, virtue, holiness, blessedness." Paul clearly claims that the Word of God has the power to provide that very maturation and spiritual development.

Second, the Word is able to give saints their eternal inheritance among all the other saints ("all them that are sanctified"). This statement simply and explicitly states that God's Word has the ability and is sufficient, **in itself**, to bring us to Heaven in eternity.

Paul plainly described the source, function, and capability of God's Word in a familiar passage in his second letter to Timothy:

Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

The source of Scripture is God, Who, through the Holy Spirit, directly revealed His will to chosen men. These men spoke and wrote what was revealed to them (1 Cor. 2:10, 13; 2 Pet. 1:20–21) and thereby produced the Bible. *Scripture* literally means "that which is written." (The KJV may have the better and clearer rendering of the first part of this passage: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God....")

Now note the claims Paul made for the Scriptures, the written Word of God: First, they are "profitable" (i.e., useful, helpful) in four distinct areas. They provide (1) teaching/doctrine, (2) reproof, (3) correction, and (4) instruction in righteousness. Paul encompasses in these four elements every possible spiritual resource and need children of God may have. We know that this is his intent because the apostle immediately so states. Second, the Scriptures (carefully studied and properly handled and applied) will make one spiritually complete, equipped for every good work. Is not this a description of spiritual completeness and readiness that will fit one for Heaven? Can one be more spiritually "complete" than "complete"?

In light of these two passages a question is in order: Can one go to Heaven by simply reading and obeying the Word of God (the New Testament in particular), or does one need something in addition to the Bible? It is obvious that, in spite of these bold apostolic declarations, many do not believe the Bible alone is sufficient to enable the Christian to fight temptation successfully and finally inherit eternal life.

Pagans and Muslims obviously reject the Bible. However, none of those groups professing some "Bible connection" are content with the Bible alone. Beginning with the cults

(e.g., Mormonism, Christian Science, Jehovah’s Witnesses, et al.) and spanning the denominational gamut from Roman Catholicism to the Baptists, they must all have more than the Bible alone to even exist. Taking the Bible alone would cause the instant self-destruction of every religious body that rejects or adds to the Bible.

Since its first utterance in the nineteenth century, the following aphorism has served the cause of Truth well:

Any creed book that says more than the Bible says too much. Any creed book that says less than the Bible says too little. Any creed book that says only what the Bible says (if such should ever exist) is unnecessary because we have the Bible.

If the Bible is capable of its claimed abilities, then any doctrine or book added to it is superfluous. No—more than superfluous. Any addition is an **abomination** and is therefore damning in its effect (Gal. 1:6–9; 1 Tim. 4:1–2; 2 Tim. 4:1–4; Jam. 1:25; 1 Pet. 4:11; Rev. 22:18–19). All additions imply weakness in the Bible and in the Holy Spirit Who revealed and inspired it. If the Bible itself can be trusted, then **the Bible and the Bible alone** is all that we need to see us safely to the other side.

Since the Scriptures explicitly claim the fullness of power to instruct and encourage us so as to fit us for and take us to eternal glory, how then say some (whether within or without) that they are insufficient and unable to do so **apart from additional direct help from the Holy Spirit**? How can some aver that saints cannot bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23) without immediate help from the Holy Spirit—in addition to that which He supplies through His Word? Why do some claim that the Spirit’s Word is too insipid to empower us with the spiritual strength we need (Eph. 3:16–19)? (We do not, of course, exclude such Scripturally-stated encouragements to faithfulness as may come from God’s imponderable providence [Rom. 8:28] and fellowship with brethren [1 Tim. 4:12].)

The last statements in 2 Timothy 3:16–17 and Ephesians 3:16–19 are strikingly similar. In the former, one is made “complete, furnished completely unto every good work.” In the latter, one is “filled unto all the fullness of God.” Again, in the former, Paul explicitly declared the inspired Word to be the source of completeness. To the Ephesians, he attributes the source of spiritual fullness to the “Spirit in the inward man.” If (as I judge) Paul writes about essentially the same thing in both passages, he therefore teaches that the way in which the Spirit strengthens us is **through His Word**. Now, had Paul said in Ephesians 3:16 “that ye may be strengthened with power **directly** through his Spirit in the inward man,” “direct-operation” advocates would have a case. However, just as one must **supply** the word *directly* to find it in the passage, one must also **assume** the “direct-operation” doctrine to find it in the New Testament.

One cannot have it both ways. If these passages mean what they say, then the written Word—with no additional direct help from the Holy Spirit—is able to build us up, completely equip us, strengthen us, and fill us so that we can be saved in the end. However, if we must have direct help from the Spirit to secure our final salvation, as some allege, then these passages do not mean what they say. If these passages do not mean what they say, on what basis can we trust the rest of the Bible?

[Note: I wrote this MS, and it originally appeared as an “Editorial Perspective” in the June 2001 issue of *THE GOSPEL JOURNAL*, a 36-page monthly of which I was editor at the time.]

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