

Pictures and Words

Can we always trust what we see? I watched a clip of a video on the Internet the other day in which a woman was being held hostage by a man with a gun, and two police officers were standing with their guns drawn, trying to get him to let the woman go. As the scene unfolded, a soldier came upon the situation from behind and managed to sneak up on the man with the gun and subdue him. It appeared that he was a hero. He was not. A film crew was filming a scene for a movie, and what appeared to be a real hostage situation was actually a group of actors doing what they do best. What the soldier saw needed explanation. What we see can be deceiving.

Pictures, what we see, often need interpretation. A picture is worth a thousand words, we often hear said, and that is true. It's far easier to draw a picture of a house plan than it is to try to describe it to the builder. Of course, if one has never seen a blueprint, they will not know what they are looking at without explanation. Pictures, while they convey a story, most often need to have an explanation so that we can understand that story.

The sacraments are a good example of this. If someone who did not speak English and who had no exposure to Christianity came to our church on a Communion Sunday and watched what was happening, what would they think? They would not think for a moment that a meal was being served, for the quantity of food and drink that is distributed would scarcely sustain a mouse let along a human being. They might conclude that communion is some kind of ritual, but they would not, from mere observation, conclude that what was being remembered and celebrated was a crucifixion that took place 2000 years ago, and they would never guess that that crucifixion served to save us from our sins. There is no meaning to communion without explanation, but with explanation, with words, the ritual takes on a deep meaning.

In Scripture, what people could observe came with explanation. Without that explanation, there would be no understanding. Thus, those who do not hold to the teachings of Scripture but who find historical record of things that Scripture tells us about, try to come up with explanations of what they see. Archaeology may tell of the destruction of Jericho but instead of seeing this to be truly an act of God (unlike earthquakes today which are the result of the movement of tectonic plates and not at all an act of God per the insurance company) – instead of seeing the destruction of Jerich to be God's work, they find some other explanation, one that best fits what they see but which is incorrect. Likewise, David's victory over Goliath cannot be explained by saying that this young lad was adept with a slingshot but, rather, that God enabled David to bring victory to the Israelites. If we are going to understand something that we observe, we need an explanation.

Of course, the explanation needs to be correct. The devil tempted Eve to eat of the tree, saying that if she did, her eyes would be opened. She took a new look at the tree and saw that the fruit was good for food and pleasing to the eye. The devil reinterpreted a picture for her, and his interpretation led her to draw a false conclusion as to the value of the tree. Sadly, by being misled by false words, she began a process which drew her husband into disobedience as well, and that disobedience extended to the rest of

humankind. Had Eve listened to her trustworthy God, she would not have sinned, and we would have been in a very different place today.

The lesson to be learned here is that we cannot trust what we see. We need an explanation, but we need to be careful to have the right interpretation. This is where God's Word becomes exceedingly valuable, in fact, indispensable. We would not understand the world around us if it weren't for the explanation that God provides.

Yet, increasingly, we are being led to believe that what we see is of great value and we should draw conclusions by that which appears before us. We are told that what appears to be good must be good. We might see two people appearing to be very happy, perhaps because they are in a relationship together. Everything appears to be good because it looks good. Yet, as we well know from Eve's experience, what appears to be good might not be good. We need to evaluate that relationship in the light of God's Word. A couple happily having dinner together at a fine restaurant could well be a boss, a married man, who is having an affair with his secretary. What appears to be wonderful might actually be wrong when an explanation is given, especially if it brought into the light of God's Word. Appearances can be deceiving and often are.

It is often said that there are two means by which God reveals himself, creation and his Word. Creation appears before us as a wonderful picture, but we can misinterpret what we see. Many people look at creation and see no evidence of God at all. That sometimes comes as a surprise to a Christian unless we admit that what we see can be misleading. We need the word of explanation that God created all things, and if we view a sunset or a waterfall from that perspective, it is only then that we understand how creation reveals God to us.

We should always be wary, therefore, of what we see. Something may look wonderful, but if we receive the proper interpretation, we will discover that it is not so beautiful after all. The key word in the previous sentence, of course, is "proper." We always need to return to God's Word for a proper explanation, interpretation or evaluation of what we see. We can also have improper interpretations, and those make the situation worse than if there is no interpretation at all.

Let's be wary, then, that we do not draw conclusions about what is right or wrong by what we see. Pictures and images can often be misleading unless we are told what they mean. God's Word is the final authority for explanation, and all other explanations must conform to that. If something does not conform to divine explanation, chances are we have misunderstood what we have seen and are being deceived. This is why it is important that we know God's Word so that we can properly understand the world around us.

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