

STUDY 12

‘Wise unto Salvation’

Brian Arthur

But where can wisdom be found?
And where is the place of understanding?
Man does not know its value,
Nor is it found in the land of the living.
The deep says, ‘It is not in me’;
And the sea says, ‘It is not with me’
(Job 28:12–13, NASB).

JOB’S DILEMMA

The answer to Job’s universal question is both confounding and liberating. It is confounding because of fallen humanity’s search for God’s wisdom down fruitless paths of reason, willpower, religion, culture: Liberating because God’s wisdom is clearly and freely revealed through the Scriptures to be found in Christ. His wisdom for salvation cuts through the interminable static plaguing the heart and conscience. This static is not just the deficiency embodied in false wisdom. More significantly it is the pollution that comes to humanity searching for that wisdom apart from God and with hatred towards God. This dire pollution only gives way in the presence of the true salvation of God. God’s wisdom then is seen in the effectual way he directs humanity out of their polluting wisdom to and into his salvation. According to Jesus and Paul this wisdom is found in the Scriptures because they alone and effectually deliver us to Christ:¹

Jesus:

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27, ESV).

Paul:

And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15, AV).

This paper begins to explore the connection in the Scriptures between God’s wisdom and the way of salvation and faith revealed in Christ.

¹ It (the Law) typically pointed to Christ, educated Israel for Christ and therefore also attained its end and goal in Christ. Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 3, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2006, p. 207.

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THE HOLY SCRIPTURES OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Whenever the sacred writings or Scriptures are referred to by the Lord and the apostles, they mean the Old Testament delivered to the Jews by God and referred to as the law and the prophets. This is true of Paul in the passage above. We may unthinkingly read this verse in Timothy with a New Testament switch as if he was referring to the books of the New Testament not the Old. We would all agree that the New Testament can make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. We may agree that the Old Testament contains many allusions to Christ and leads us historically through his antecedents. But Paul is saying that the wisdom of having faith in Christ for salvation is the substance and directive of the Old Testament.

Our Lord clearly made the same point when he quieted the static in the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke clearly says that Jesus took them back through the law and prophets (Luke 24:27). What is also clear, from the tone of the Lord’s strong rebuke, was that the disciples’ dullness of heart to believe was inexcusable in the light of all the prophets had revealed concerning the necessity and meaning of Messiah’s death and glorification.

As he engaged them on the road Jesus drew them out as to what they understood had happened in Jerusalem. They had a reasonable grasp of the events of Calvary and the tomb. But what they shared demonstrated a lack of faith. His crucifixion and resurrection was seen as a tragic puzzle. Nothing of God’s agenda had been understood. They made no connection with the wisdom given in the Old Testament and the events of Christ’s death. They had received no faith en-gifting revelation. They had a history but no prophetic word. Their foolishness or dullness was not intellectual, a lack of reasoning capabilities, it was refusal to see and believe in the wisdom of their Scriptures. Here they were, in the presence of the one their Scriptures were all about, and they remained in another world. Their fear remained. According to Jesus, had they received the Scriptures correctly then they would have at least had the wisdom of connecting his death and resurrection with the wisdom of God’s salvation.

CHRIST FORMED AND ESTABLISHED BY GOD THROUGH THE OLD TESTAMENT

According to Jesus, what God was revealing about him in the Old Testament was clear enough to make the disciples’ continuing confusion unthinkable. Their dullness was total, even in those who had walked for three years with the one who was the fullness of Old Testament wisdom. The great grace that now confronted them was the True Moses, Prophet of all prophets, Spirit of all the law, substance of all the sacrificial system, explaining in the power of the Spirit everything they had previously ignored. As he spoke, the lights went on for them. But these were lights already burning bright in the understanding of Jesus. Nothing about the Old Testament was foreign country to him; all of it established his heart to trust the Father. Everything about the Old Testament had brought this man of Nazareth to walk in the joy and security of the Father’s wisdom spelled out from before the Garden. Everything about his unity with the purpose of God’s wisdom to save the world through him, he had

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learned by the Spirit from the Old Testament. For Jesus, to ‘have Moses and the prophets’ (Luke 16:29) meant having a true revelation of God. For Jesus this meant the wisdom to walk with his Father as a man can, to draw upon his Father for all he was as a true Son.

Wherever Jesus looked, from Moses to Malachi, the light of God’s trust-creating wisdom burnt away the static of every other form of religious, cultural or moral wisdom found in the world. All he learned was the product of his communion with his Father, received gift-wise through the Spirit and the Scriptures. So the Spirit and the Scriptures were a dynamic unity, continually keeping his heart delighted in the will of God.

His was not to close down the Old Testament as if it had been a rather tawdry failure on God and Israel’s part, a kind of planned obsolescence of rudimentary laws and rituals now to be outmoded by him. His Bible study to the disciples on the Emmaus road revealed the true authority of the Scriptures. It was this same authority of the Scriptures in which the apostles stood lock-step with Christ. This acceptance of God’s self-vindicating authority from creation to the *eschaton* was always assumed but never argued in apologetic terms. ‘If one objects that starting from the rudiments He brings the disciples gradually to bid farewell to the prophets and pass over to the perfect Gospel, it is here easily refuted . . . all the apostles had their minds opened, not to knowledge divorced from the aid of Law, but to understand the Scriptures’.²

CHRIST’S CONGRUENCE WITH THE OLD TESTAMENT

For Christ and then the apostles, the Old was not merely a chronology leading to the New Testament, it was vitally connected. Both treated the Old Testament as a Christian book.³ This did not mean a denial or reinterpretation of its Jewishness. It meant as Jews seeing its orientation towards Jesus as Lord and Saviour of the Jews first then the Gentiles. In our Lord’s exposition of the Scriptures on the road it is clear that as the Incarnate Word he finds complete personal congruence with the word of God given to ancient Israel. He readily goes back to the beginning and finds himself at the heart of what is going on.

As the effectual prophetic word, delivering the fullness of God’s wisdom in the fullness of time in the fullness of Christ, the Old Testament was accepted by the church in two significant ways: As a unified revelation, and the basis of apostolic authority:

And so we have the prophetic word made more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts (2 Pet. 1:19, NASB).

There is an unembarrassed unity between Christ’s person and work and the Old Testament revelation of God’s salvation wisdom. Despite its diverse nature as a

² John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke vol. 3, and the Epistles of James and Jude*, tr. A. W. Morrison, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1972, p. 235.

³ ‘When they quote from it they always quote in a Christian sense’, James Denney, *Studies in Theology* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1895), p. 211.

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collection of books, mediated through a less than perfect collection of prophets, Christ confessed it as a single unity completing itself in him.⁴

THE WISDOM OF THE SCRIPTURES

The wisdom in the Scriptures is not an end in itself. From 2 Timothy 3:15 we see that it delivers us to Christ. He is the final Word of God on salvation (this is a most important point when we come later to discuss the reliability of the Scriptures).

Biblical wisdom is not to be discovered and used as we would the writings of a guru, historian or scientist. It is the wisdom that reveals the true glory of God in communion, the true purpose for creation in that communion and, most significantly for humanity, the true way of participating in that communion with God. So it cannot be a closed-book wisdom. It must be the product and ongoing instrument in the hands of the Spirit that actually breaks into the human heart:

The certainty of faith lies in the inward confirmation of the Spirit concerning the objective validity of the biblical revelation. We are given a spiritual, not a rational, certainty. The mysteries of faith remain incomprehensible, but the Giver of faith works within us a confident trust and assurance.⁵

It is wisdom that examines and unmask us, not simply instructs or appeals to us. It has, from Adam, found us in our deepest death and alone directed Jew and Gentile effectively and solely to God’s solution in his Son.

This means that the wisdom of the Scriptures is the place where the fire burns. It is not some passive body of knowledge that we can feed into our self-reforms, moralistic cleansings, methods of self-help cultural or religious, thus avoiding issues of conscience, wrath and love. From the beginning they are about the conscience and the holy love of God. God’s call to Adam, ‘Where are you?’ and his challenge to Cain, ‘Why are you angry?’ confront each of God’s people in salvation history.

The Scriptures ancient or modern are not at first history, a cosmology, or even a theology, but the fiery presence of the Holy and Righteous One. He will continually abort our attempts to justify and rescue ourselves and confront us with his wisdom which says the righteousness by which I will be glorified in you can only come as I weld you into my Son. The arc of that weld—where righteousness, love and wrath speak true wisdom—melts the very Son of God and burns to extinction the compound-ing corruption of all our brilliant wisdom.

Our approach to the Scriptures, in particular our search for wisdom in them, can be the product of certain cut-off points. We can illustrate the point from Paul’s words:

The Scriptures are able to make us wise/
unto salvation/
through faith/
which is in Christ/

⁴ ‘It is one, because it is the product of one work of God proceeding continuously through the ages and completing itself in Christ’, James Denney, *Studies in Theology*, pp. 212f.

⁵ Donald G. Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1992, p. 202.

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Each of the slash points can represent a cut-off point in our approach to the Scripture. Each cut-off point leaves us with a deficient wisdom which turns out to be worse than the wisdom we started with. Deficient because, despite being dressed in biblical terms, it is all the expression of the world’s wisdom. No wisdom of sinners comes to the righteousness of God ministering to the human conscience in the cataclysm of Calvary and the tomb. They all begin and end with the human scene. With the disease of Adam after Eden nagging in our conscience, we even fly to the possibility of using God’s word to solve the problem:

The trumpet of conscience sounds; we start with apprehension; we feel the touch of holiness upon us—but at first we do not dream of appealing beyond ourselves for help in our need and anxiety. Quite the opposite. ‘They said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them throughly. Let us build a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth!’⁶

Such wisdom is all derived from an appeal to ourselves and our ‘brilliant’ tower-building capabilities. Consider how each cut-off point leaves us with a ‘non-wisdom’ divorced from God’s wisdom and therefore Jesus Christ. Each resultant deficient ‘wisdom’ can be seen through the history of God’s revelation.

We can use the Scriptures to make us wise

To stop there means the Scriptures can become another brick in the wall, another flag to wave from our high tower. Christ is not required except as the emblem on our flag. His words are selected carefully and simply pile up as a more palatable version of the perceived crudity of Moses. Our moralism insulates us from the true wisdom of God in Christ as we stand crushed by guilt, waving our flag till we drop with the exhausting illusion of it all.

We can use the Scriptures to make us wise unto salvation

But with no bloodied Jesus of Nazareth holding our flag-waving bodies into his death, we end with a ‘salvation’ which is far from wise. We arrogate to ourselves the right to define our own salvation. Like the Jews of Jesus’ day, the external might of present enemies deflects us from the dreaded needs within, the crisis of conscience. The strain of our guilt is attributed to others, things and weaknesses outside of us that we must first be saved from.

We take the great dramas of the Old Testament, the shadows of the real to come, and turn them into little one act plays to perform in our classes and studies. Taking the offensive, embarrassing sins of the great men, we turn them into moral curriculums to teach our young ones how not to appear before God and others. We isolate sins like David’s, and God’s ‘offensive unlawful forgiveness’ (when divorced from Calvary) and turn them into ‘God just takes me as I am’ theology. We develop our moral curriculum so that the ‘moral’ elder brother in the parable of the lost son becomes the

⁶ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Peter Smith Publ. Inc, Gloucester, 1978 , p. 14.

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hard-done-by lad. He has a point to be cross because we too have spent all our lives working for God, slogging our guts out in duty to his word. Under this deceiving wisdom:

Our answer to the call of conscience is one great makeshift, extending over the whole of life, a single gigantic ‘as if’ . . . And because and as long as we are willing to think, speak, and act ‘as if’—*as if* our tower were important, as if something were happening, as if we were doing something in obedience to the conscience—the reality of the righteousness after which we hunger and thirst will elude us.⁷

We can use the Scriptures to make us wise unto salvation through faith

Faith then becomes the servant of our willpower religion. It is the energy that we polish and stress about, by which we bring our dutiful offerings to God. It looks at the good Father, seeking to feel more and more obliged to greater feats by his goodness, but ends up in a grumbling mess when the Father’s grace appears. Grace being seen as moral weakness in blessing unworthy objects is relegated to the recycle bin from which it can be restored at a later date with a new name. Salvation by faith alone is eagerly waved from our ‘new’ old tower. But we remain deeply unsettled. We feel a curse on ourselves and transmit that curse to all others who listen to our wisdom from our word.

We can use the Scriptures to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ

Every good Jew in the day of Jesus would have said ‘Amen!’ to this statement, whilst looking at that very Messiah as if he were at worst a blasphemer or at best a good miracle worker. The Scriptures, according to Jesus and Paul, could never allow for a general, vague messiah figure whose authority would be given him by the acclaim of the people. The Scriptures led Israel directly to Jesus of Nazareth.

Worldly wisdom loves the idea of messiahs. Our cultures are full of them. Anybody or anything that can get our tower built is treated ‘as if’ our tower was significant in God’s way of salvation and embraced with delight. Worldly wisdom quite enjoys this goodly but tragic figure of Jesus. Both are used in profusion to cover up and soothe and silence the need for Jesus the Messiah. He allows for no self-reforms, no sanitation of sin, no methodologies of progress. Everything that the wisdom of the world calls real he demolishes in blood and agony. The deadly conscience-static, the product of our morality and culture generating its saving wisdom, only comes to silence in that blood and agony. Or more accurately it only comes to silence in the Sabbath rest of the empty tomb. No temporary sedation from a Jesus-less messiah or a messiah-less Jesus can hold off the crisis of righteousness in the conscience. Moses, Abraham, David and the rest knew this and their prophetic word delivers them and us to God’s wise solution.

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 15.

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Every one of these cut-off points delivers a cut-off god who is not God. We are left, with the unending applause of the evil one, with our ‘right’ thought of God instead of his right thought for us.⁸

The impossibility of the Old Testament teaching on love, holiness, righteousness, faith, covenant, worship, and so forth, apart from the Christ of God, is the dangerous impossibility of neglect and sanitising of conscience. No right-minded person standing before the Tabernacle on the Day of Atonement could have thought that the mystery of an evil conscience and the presence of God in all his holiness could be finalised there. They knew by the continual need for that day that it was just the shadow of something far more effective. Nobody worshipping in the Temple with its echoes and promises of Eden should have terminated true worship there. The miracle waiting to emerge, the ‘possible’ needing to materialise, was only in Jesus of Nazareth.

So the wisdom Paul spoke about to Timothy is deeply and continually alien to the thinking of humanity outside of faith. Therefore any exploration of the wisdom of the Scriptures in bringing us to salvation by faith in Christ raises the issues of authority and sufficiency. How does the authority of the Scriptures manifest? How is this authority received and experienced? Is the authority of the Scriptures sufficient to deliver what is needed? Is it a ‘throw-back’ wisdom, throwing us back onto ourselves?

THE AUTHORITY OF THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus, as we have seen, assumed the Scriptures to be both authoritative and sufficient and never sought to prove either. The ‘proof’ of their authoritative sufficiency for him was the Father he knew by faith through the revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures. All that the law and the prophets had spoken about him and God’s purpose through him had been accomplished in him: that was authority and sufficiency indeed. What is more, he trusted that what the Father had created in him was authorised and sufficient to go to the ends of the earth. The Spirit poured out constantly upon him affirmed his identity and work which God had purposed and made clear in the Scripture.

In other words, the authority of the Scriptures for Jesus was not discovering the distillation of a better moral code than other sacred writings. It was not a fastidious jot and tittle search of grammar and words for correctness. It was the authority that delivered what it promised, and this not to his head alone but all of his experience.

The authority of the Scriptures for Jesus was not in a collection of propositions he could approve, prove, and then apply as moral principles. It was God revealing himself to him. It was God evoking sonship, family, destiny in his humanity. It wrought upon him with irresistible gifting so that what God promised, appeared. Like the response of creation to the Word, the pregnant Command, so the word of God to Jesus

⁸ The following quote is from Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p. 43:

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ.

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brought the Messiah of God into existence in his flesh. As Forsyth said, ‘A real authority, we have seen, is indeed *within* experience, but it is not the authority *of* experience, it is an authority *for* experience, it is an authority experienced.’⁹ Denney makes a similar point: ‘It has an authority in it or along with it by which it vindicates itself to faith as divinely and infallibly true; it asserts itself irresistibly, and beyond a doubt, as the supreme revelation of God’s judgment and mercy to penitent souls.’¹⁰

If we claim in matters of faith and practice to depend totally upon Christ and the teaching of Scripture, we may learn much from his silence on many issues. Things that we have made articles of faith—namely inerrancy, infallibility—he was silent about. It is possible to argue for such things whilst remaining as dull to the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures as the disciples going to Emmaus. It is abundantly clear from our Lord’s rebuke of the leaders that we may have a fastidious, orthodox view of the Scriptures and live completely in the wisdom of the world concerning the way of salvation:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life (John 5:39–40, ESV).

No doubt great and necessary battles have been fought to preserve the Scriptures as we know them. But much of the modern battle seems to have sidetracked the church. We may know much about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, whilst refusing to submit to him as Saviour and come to faith. As with everything to do with the life and way of God, we are continually wrought upon to turn it into religion. When we begin to treat the Scriptures as a manual for morality or a handbook on true religion or a conglomerate wisdom of science, mysticism, geology, history, psychology and sociology, then the way we approach its authority and sufficiency will change radically. Then authority moves into impersonal, technical areas of analysis of the minutiae. Then their sufficiency becomes a matter of them reaching our standards of accuracy. Our exploration of the Scriptures becomes information gathering, not faith communing.

When the infallibility of the Scriptures is set as an article of faith which we feel we have to ‘prove’ in order to convince the world that it is a reliable text on God, then danger is near.¹¹ Then, demonstrating to an unbelieving world that we have an infallible book becomes an impossible but essential exercise. If only we can prove the Scriptures to them, we think they will be converted. In this case the Holy Spirit is either left out of the picture or simply brought in to operate on some written document to make it alive.¹² This is not how the Reformers understood the inspiration of the

⁹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority: In Relation to Certainty, Sanctity and Society*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2004, p. 75.

¹⁰ J. Denney, *Studies in Theology*, p. 223.

¹¹ See Martin Bleby, ‘Sacred Book or Revelatory Person?’ in *God Speaking, Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, p. 69. He includes quotes from Jens Christensen, comparing Christians’ views of the inspiration of Scripture with the formation of the Koran.

¹² But inspiration does not mean that the writing is composed, set up and then somehow the Spirit of God invests it. It means rather that the whole process is under God’s control, in accordance with the specific purpose of his revelation and that the resultant Scripture can be said to be uttered by the Holy Spirit who also moved the writer in the first place. Donald Robinson, *Donald Robinson: Selected Works*, vol. 2, ‘Preaching God’s Word’, Australian Church Record, Camperdown, 2008, p. 37.

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Scriptures. Both Luther and Calvin were men of the Book. The word and Spirit were never apart in their experience of the authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures.¹³

Donald Robinson points out that the term ‘infallibility’ means, ‘that which cannot fall’ or ‘that which cannot fail’. ‘God’s word cannot fall, cannot fail. God’s word stands fast forever. It does not return to him void. It accomplishes the purpose to which he sends it (Isa. 55:11).’¹⁴ So understood in the light of 2 Timothy 3:15, the Old Testament leads us infallibly to Christ for faith. His effectual presence and then his effectual calling of the apostles and their effectual testimony to the nations bears witness to the true authority and sufficiency of the Scriptures in the power of the Spirit:

But, as it is written,

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him’—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:9–13, ESV).

The sufficiency of the Scriptures then is the certainty that what God has always spoken concerning his purposes in his Son are infallible and the Son alone has delivered us to faith which is effectually revealed and delivered to the conscience by the Holy Spirit.

To attempt to gain this sufficiency from the Scriptures alone is to fail. We may well gain a certain knowledge of Jesus but it will be Jesus ‘after the flesh’, a Jesus of history, a Jesus of geography, a Jesus of Jewish politics. In seeing Jesus after the flesh we will fail totally to see the Christ of God. How have we learned Christ? Paul implies in Ephesians 4:20 that it is possible to ‘learn Christ’ incorrectly after the flesh. In which case we will have a false Christ, harder to exorcise than the other idols of unbelief.

That so few in Jesus’ day had learned Christ from the Old Testament does not mean that the Scriptures were inadequate. It does tell us that there is a fierce battle against the wisdom of God in the Scriptures being seen and received. When the full communion of Covenant love was ignored or turned to religious duty then hearing by faith was lost. Other gods spoke a multitude of wisdom paths into creation. There were no shortages of ways people thought they should come to Christ and what to expect from him. From the moment of Cain’s indifference to God’s wisdom directing him out of himself to Christ, Israel and the nations were awash with corrupted wisdom. The way to Christ became the way to anything but reality. The wisdom of God seemed unnecessary and complicated and offensively bloody.

¹³ The following quote is from Donald Bloesch, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, p. 198:

They focused their attention not on the Bible as a codebook of law but on the Bible as the law of life and freedom. Their trust was not in the Bible as a book of history but in the Bible made alive in the church by the action of the Spirit. While a church or council may sometimes err, the Bible never errs in that it gives us the truth originally intended by the Spirit so long as we search the Scriptures in faith. But our infallible standard for faith is not the Bible in and of itself but the Bible united with the Spirit.

¹⁴ Donald Robinson, ‘Preaching God’s Word’, p. 37.

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We come then to this ‘gold mine’ of the Old Testament. By God’s providence and finally in the hands of Christ it becomes to us the wisdom which locks us into salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The wonderment is not about a book of antiquity. It is the wonderment into which angels long to look (1 Pet. 1:12). It is the wonderment of following a long line of prophets who delivered to us the gracious wisdom of God found in Christ. It is the wonderment of drinking deeply of the grace those flawed old men of grace said would be ours. The wonderment that our history and our future is wisely in the hands of God’s Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. The wonderment of God describing and revealing himself, not us explaining ourselves. Ours is to cry, ‘Grace to it!’ to the deep and in the land of the living.