

The Finger of God

by Tom Macartney

The sermon emphasizes the 'finger of God' as a guiding force in a confused world, pointing to creation, the Bible, grace, and transformed lives as signposts to truth and salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 8:4, John 3:19, Acts 20:24, Romans 1:20, Ephesians 6:10

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Gospel Grace"

Description

Tom Macartney preaches about the God-given signposts in a lost and confused world, emphasizing the importance of recognizing these signposts that point to God's truth and grace. The sermon highlights five ways in which the finger of God acts as a great signpost: through creation and man's creation, the Bible as God's true message, the spiritual and moral nature of man, the uniqueness of the gospel of grace, and the victory of the cross shown in transformed lives.

Transcript

We live in a lost world and a world that has lost its way as if the moral and spiritual signposts have been altered by someone and so point in the wrong directions. Universal confusion reigns as chaos takes over. It seems today that the deceiver of the whole world is taking over in a new way (Rev. 12 :9).

At such a time we may be profoundly grateful for the God-given signposts we do have. Our guiding thought will be that the finger of God points like a great signpost amid the confusion, and does so in five ways.

1. In the whole creation and man's creation supremely

It is a huge tragedy that today we are witnessing a twofold attack by militant unbelief on God Himself and man His supreme creation. The amazing discoveries of science, which should lead men God-ward and to a true understanding of man's high destiny (as made in His image), because of the perversity of fallen human nature and the deceiving work of Satan, are interpreted and projected in such a way as to rule out His very existence and to reduce man to the status of an animal and ultimate meaninglessness and nothingness.

"For ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes - His eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without any excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

"When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers ... what is man? Yet you have crowned him with glory and honour, and given him dominion over the works of your hands" (Psalm 8; Gen. 1:26, 27).

"Yet at present, we do not see everything subject to man. But we see Jesus ... because He suffered death, now crowned with glory and honour"(Heb. 2:5-10).

These verses show that the whole creation in its vastness and amazing intricacy points to its great Architect and Creator; further, they show man as God's masterpiece, at the centre of all His creative activity, the summit of creation, the work of the fingers of a Master-craftsman; and finally, they reveal and explain the apparent great contradiction (the presence of evil in the creation), that, in spite of his high destiny, man is now fallen, alienated from God and in need of redemption, and that it is in and through God's Son, the Lord Jesus, the God-Man, alone, that the great goal is achieved. Ultimately, the whole creation and man derive their meaning from God's Son. All the signposts point to Him.

The universe did not happen by chance - it has a Creator. Man is not the product of purposeless evolution - he was created in the image of God. But the unbeliever persists in suppressing these truths (Rom. 1:18). The clever, unbelieving scientist is in reality a fool for, "The fool has said in his heart, there is no God" (Psalm 14:1). It is to the simple and open-hearted that the truth is made clear (Matt. 11:25; 21:15, 16).

2. In the Bible

Another great signpost towering above the chaos of this world is the Bible. We read of the two tablets of stone containing the ten commandments (summed up in two in Matt. 22:36-40), that they were written with the finger of God (Deut. 9:10; 4:13), and we may safely say the same of the whole Bible. God is its true Author: "All scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). It is God's word, declaration and message to the human race, revealing Himself and His will, and pointing the way out of our confusion.

The key to understanding and interpreting the Bible is to realise that the whole Bible points to God's Son, the Lord Jesus(Luke 24:27, 44, 45). He is the living Word of God, who embodies everything God has to say, and to whom the written Word always points, for He is the explanation of all creation and the answer to all our questions.

The very existence of the Bible is a major miracle (considering what men and Satan have done to destroy it), and its contents a constant wonder, for it bears witness to the fact of Christ, the supreme and inescapable fact of human history. We have to say that the most vociferous enemies of the Bible and its message have never been willing honestly to expose themselves to the Person there revealed. It is a moral impossibility to confront Christ in the Bible, that is, to seek honestly to know the truth of His claims for Himself, for example by reading John's gospel to start with (20:30, 31), without exclaiming with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:15, 16). This is because of the convicting and enlightening work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8-14). The implications of this for the unbeliever are fearful: "And this is the judgment that the light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). Is this solemn note missing in our presentation of the gospel today?

3. In the spiritual and moral nature of man

As we have mentioned before, militant, modern ideas not only insist that there is no God, but also that there is no man (in the Biblical sense), that is to say, that man is not unique but only a superior animal

doomed to cease to exist at death like all animals (there being no after-life). This stands in flat contradiction, not only to the Bible, but also to a mountain of evidence to the contrary, glossed over and seldom even mentioned. (For example, it has been well said that, Goodness (the witness of conscience), truth (and its perception) and beauty (and its appreciation) form a trio that ultimately elude scientific analysis. They are like steps that lie between the world of physical science and the personal knowledge of God.) According to the Bible, man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27). We cannot now digress to consider the full meaning of this, which includes the mystery of personality - we shall only mention one or two things relevant to our present purpose. Because God is spirit (John 4:24), a spiritual Being, when He breathed into man the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), at his creation, man received a spiritual faculty (the human spirit, that factor in human personality which proceeds immediately from God; 1 Cor. 2:11), which made it possible for him to have fellowship with God (and contact with the unseen, spiritual world). Man's creation in the likeness of God includes this extra faculty, inexplicable in purely scientific terms, that is in terms of his heredity and environment.

Further, we read that God has planted eternity in the hearts of men (Eccl. 3:11), so that man has an innate sense of eternity (everlastingness), and knows instinctively that he was not born to die, and longs for immortality. And yet man fears death (Heb. 2:14, 15), because he knows he is a sinner facing a day of judgment; for man has a conscience, a sense of right and wrong (Rom. 2:15, 16; Heb. 9:27). Animals are not worried about these things - why not? Because they have no spiritual faculty and no conscience. "The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts" (Prov. 20:27). Christ, the light of the world, is the true light who enlightens everyone responsive to it (John 1:9; 8:12).

The overwhelming evidence for the spiritual nature of man, upon which we have only touched, is the undoing of the unbelieving scientific approach which has no answers to the evidence for this higher dimension of existence, this mysterious element in human personality; even the paranormal frightens it. The well-known story of Belshazzar's feast and the writing on the wall, recorded in Daniel 5, read against the background of the judgment which fell upon his grand-father Nebuchadnezzar because of pride (Daniel 4), provides us with a remarkable illustration of our point. Belshazzar knew what had happened to his grand-father and why (Dan. 5:22-24), and yet he deliberately defied the God who had humbled Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 5:1-4), and rejected the truth that, "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men" (Dan. 4:17). He called for the sacred vessels taken from the temple at Jerusalem to be brought and, "As they drank the wine, they praised the gods of gold and silver, of bronze, iron, wood and stone". Then, "Suddenly the fingers of a human hand appeared and wrote ... on the wall ... the king watched the hand as it wrote. His face turned pale and he was so frightened that his knees knocked together and his legs gave way" (Dan. 5:5, 6). Suddenly his conscience was confronted by the Lord of heaven (Dan. 5:23). Suddenly he found himself weighed in the balances and found wanting (Dan. 5:27). Suddenly the invisible world became all too real and the all important one. The finger of God was writing his doom, and he knew it - that very night Belshazzar was slain (Dan. 5:30). Perhaps he had scoffed at Nebuchadnezzar's experience. Peter tells us that a feature of the last days before the coming again of Christ will be mocking (2 Pet. 3:3, 4). It is a feature of our day. Few see the writing on the wall, announcing the end of Western civilisation (a by-product of the preaching of the gospel) which, under God's sovereignty, has put something of a brake on world chaos and disintegration for hundreds of years. The dearth of God-fearing (let alone Christian) leaders is patent - corruption reigns in the corridors of power. God is mocked. Remember Belshazzar.

There is an unseen world, another dimension, beyond the reach of science, which can and does break into our familiar world in many ways (both good and bad). Countless people have experienced this, for man has this extra spiritual faculty to do so. For the true Christian (and him alone) this means salvation, reconciliation to God, renewal into His image and a glorious future (2 Cor. 5:20; Col. 3:10).

4. In the uniqueness of the gospel of the grace of God

In Acts 20:24, Paul sums up the task which the Lord Jesus had given him as witnessing solemnly to the gospel of the grace of God. The grace of God is at the heart of the Christian message and makes Christianity unique - in all other religions we have to earn and work for our salvation in some way. (Of course Christianity is unique in many other ways also). In none will you find anything comparable to John 3:16. The love of God, expressed in the cross, offers a free pardon and grace abounding to the chief of sinners (Rom. 5:19-21). The finger of God points a fallen world, ruined by sin and under judgment, to the grace of God. We have a wonderful illustration of this in the incident of the woman taken in adultery in John 8:2-11. Read it again. (There is a mystery about this passage, 7:53 - 8:11. The commentaries tell us that, (i) it is not from the hand of John, but (ii) it is an authentic incident in the ministry of Jesus. Perhaps the Holy Spirit deliberately saw it was included and placed here to emphasise the gulf between the Pharisees and Jesus, between law and grace.) Jesus is teaching the people in the temple, in the treasury, in the court of the women (John 8:2, 20). Note the brutal indelicacy of the action of the Pharisees, the ruthless exponents of the law (they have many followers today in the church), and their motive (to trap Jesus - would He contradict Moses or fall out with the Roman authorities?) And where was the man involved; why was he not arrested too? Note, in contrast, exactly what Jesus did and said, "He stooped down, and with His finger wrote on the ground." But when they persisted with their question, He said: "Let him that is sinless, first cast a stone at her," and then resumed writing on the ground. Finally, when conscience had done its work and the accusers had withdrawn, leaving the woman alone with Jesus, He said, "Woman (a term of respect and tenderness; comp. John 19:26), where are they? Has no one condemned you? ... No man, Lord ... Neither do I condemn you ... sin no more." He neither condoned the sin, nor condemned the sinner, for "He came not to judge the world, but to save the world" (John 12:47). The day of judgment was not yet come. Can we doubt that this poor woman was transformed that day by the grace and graciousness of God?

We do not know what Jesus wrote on the ground, if indeed He wrote anything - it has been suggested that He was simply declining, by this action, to be involved. He had not come as Judge but as Saviour. Was He embarrassed by the hounding of this woman in public? Again, it has been suggested that He wrote the words He said in verse 7, about casting the first stone. Perhaps it was an acted parable in which He was reminding them of the Old Covenant written with the finger of God long before, implying that He had come to usher in the New Covenant of which the prophets had prophesied. Certain it is that written over the whole occasion are the words of John: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). What a signpost in a lost world: Grace reigns (Rom. 5:21).

5. In the victory of the cross shown supremely in transformed lives

The Bible is just full of examples of the spiritual warfare going on in the unseen world, yet continually impinging upon life here on earth. It is impossible to read of Joseph, David, Daniel or Paul, for example, and not become aware of this. The dominion of darkness (Col. 1:13) is a reality, and the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). The battle is on, but how many of us Christians are really aware of and involved in it? There is an urgent need today for a recovery of form of

godliness; 2 Tim. 3:5), and, on the other hand, largely spurious versions of it. We are using the word super-natural here simply to make a distinction between what only God can do, and what man by his natural powers can do.

Let us start by considering this word super-natural in its Biblical context. It signifies that God is at work, or that what is happening cannot be explained in purely human terms. As Paul says: "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the powers in control of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the whole armour of God" (Eph. 6:10-20; 1 John 5:19). The context in which Christians live is super-natural in this sense, and Christians have more than ordinary (or natural) resources to live this life and engage in this spiritual warfare. In the account of the ten plagues which fell upon the Egyptians in Exodus (Ex. 7 - 12), one of the great demonstrations of the power of God in the Bible, we read that the Egyptian magicians were able to imitate the first two of these with their enchantments (Ex. 7:22; 8:7), but were then forced to confess their powerlessness, exclaiming, "This is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:18, 19). The victory of the God of heaven was manifested through Moses His servant on earth. Israel's God was shown to be greater than Egypt's gods.

The same expression is used by the Lord Jesus in Luke 11:20, "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then is the kingdom of God come upon you," which is further explained in Matt. 12:28, where the finger of God is equated with the Spirit of God. (The finger may here be the symbol of the ease with which the power of God can act, as the arm is the natural emblem of strength). The power of God is being revealed as greater than the power of Satan, here, in the deliverance of people. So, in super-natural Christianity, the power of Satan is broken and the natural (psychic) powers of man are ruled out. The super-natural is in truth miraculous and cannot be explained, reproduced or imitated by man - we are in the realm of God's activity and kingdom by His Spirit. And this is what we find in the early church in Acts. The finger of God is continually revealing another, spiritual dominion, where Christ reigns victorious, and a world which is constantly asserting itself and breaking into this one. "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mark 16:20).

Here we must pause to consider most carefully the Biblical picture of the Christian life and the life of the church with reference to the miraculous, for the enemy has most cleverly introduced great confusion here among Christians, knowing as he does what is at stake for his interests and kingdom. We may say, of course, that the whole Christian life is a miracle because it begins with the new birth and the gift of eternal life, and continues through the sufficiency of grace enabling us to run our appointed race day by day, while the great work of transforming us into the likeness of Christ prepares us for glory, but we are thinking now for a moment of those special occasions when God's power is manifest in special ways.

Looking at the New Testament, it is instructive to note the part His miracles play in the life and ministry of Christ - they are ever present as possible, but seem primarily to form a background in validating His person and teaching. He is sometimes reluctant to do them (Matt. 12:38-40), sometimes forbids those involved reporting them (Mark 1:40-45; 7:33-37), and says that miracles do not change the unbelieving heart in conversion (Luke 16:29-31). They are signs, parables and pointers, a blessing to some, but attributed by others to Satan. They not only demonstrate God's loving concern for mankind in its misery, and His absolute sovereignty over all, but are significant messages. The same is true in the Acts - miracles of healing, for example, are ever present in possibility, but usually in the background, never given centre-stage. The emphasis is always on the salvation of the lost and the transformation of the saved through preaching and teaching. This (after the resurrection) is the greatest miracle, bringing us through

new birth into a new creation and conforming us to the image of God's Son (Rom. 8:29).

It is our conviction that if there were a recovery of genuine Christianity in the church, we should often witness gracious works of healing, for example, without any fuss or noise or glorying in men, as a background to anointed teaching and preaching (Jas. 5:14, 15; 1 Cor. 2:4). There is abundant evidence that such has been the case in the past. It is tragic that the Lord is now being hindered by the intrusion of a spurious super-naturalism, which introduces a question mark over the true work of the Spirit. The supreme miracle (after His resurrection from which it flows) is, of course, the witness of transformed lives, the victorious living of His own in the power of His resurrection in difficult times (Phil. 3:10), and their Christ-like character. We note the great emphasis on the resurrection in the early church (Acts 4:2, 33). They not only proclaimed the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, but embodied it (Acts 14:19, 20; 16:25). His resurrection alone makes possible the true Christian life. Further, while the cross is interpreted by some as martyrdom, the resurrection destroys this humanistic approach. (Note also the great impression made by the raising of Lazarus (John 12:9-11, 17-19).

In 2 Cor. 3:2-3, Paul says of the Corinthians: " You are a letter from Christ ... written by the Spirit of the living God ... known and read of all men." We repeat, the most powerful witness of all on this earth to that other world, the kingdom of God's dear Son (Col. 1:13), which many deny exists but many more secretly wish to find, is the transformed lives of Christians. This is why Satan specialises in marring our testimony by our un-Christ-like behaviour.

May the Lord grant that in our individual lives and in our life together as His children there maybe much more that compels the world looking on to say: "This is the finger of God - their God is real - Christ must be the living Saviour they say He is - there is no other possible explanation for their lives - God is in them and among them - we have never seen anything like this!"

In these five ways the finger of God points like a great signpost amid the universal confusion in a world in terminal decline.

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