Lesson 11 - Questions Regarding Illumination

After our study on Illumination, a couple of you came to me with excellent questions that I wanted to answer not just for those who ask, but for all of you.

Question #1: What is the difference between Illumination and interpretation?

The simple answer is that Interpretation is what I do. Illumination is what The Holy Spirit does. But that is only a glimpse of an explanation and probably raises more questions than it supplies answers. So let’s dig a little deeper. There is a whole science called hermeneutics - derived from the Greek word (hermeneia), which means appropriately, "interpretation” or “explanation". Hermeneutics is the science of Bible interpretation. And it is a science, because it operates under fixed rules. Hermeneutics applies centuries of tried and tested principles to the task of interpretation.

Those rules for understanding the meaning of a manuscript were initially applied to the interpretation, or exegesis, of scripture, but have been broadened to be used for the interpretation of other ancient texts as well. If you take a course in literature for instance, you are taught to continually ask the question, “What did this writer mean?” That’s the principle of authorial intent. We’ve talked about that before. It’s one of the primary rules of hermeneutics. Whatever the Bible meant when it was written is exactly what it means now. Every text of scripture has one true interpretation. One only. Correct biblical interpretation is to draw the meaning out of the text. That’s called Exegesis. The opposite of exegesis, is reading a meaning, or imposing a meaning on, or into the text. That’s Eisegesis and it’s wrong because it’s using interpretation to introduce your own doctrinal bias or presuppositions into the text.

There’s The Literal Principle. That is, interpret the scripture according to normal language. The words of scripture are words that are to be understood as normal everyday language. You don’t need to go looking for some secondary meaning or some hidden interpretation because there isn’t one. So, Interpretation is what I do with those tools to gain understanding of the meaning of a text of Scripture.

Illumination on the other hand, is What the Spirit does, to give the believer understanding of how the truths uncovered in interpretation fit into the plan and purpose of God. Interpretation is an academic process. Illumination is supernatural endowment. Interpretation is working to understand what the scripture means. Illumination is the Holy Spirit opening the eyes of the Believer to understand the truth and spiritual application of scripture. It is seeing beyond the grammar and the languages. It’s seeing the supernatural aspect of the Bible that is invisible to the unbeliever. An unbeliever can apply the principles of hermeneutics, learn the biblical languages and study the history and geography, the political setting and cultural background, and can gain some degree of knowledge about the academic details. But he/she will never see the big picture, the spiritual realities.

2Corinthians 4:4 *“In whom the god of this world had blinded the minds of those who believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them.”* Unbelievers are blind to the things of God. They can’t see the spiritual realm. It’s foreign to them. I want you to see this. In a very real sense, we as Christians, live essentially in a parallel dimension that the unbelieving world doesn’t understand, and can’t relate to, because they’re spiritually blind. But we, having been regenerated, (That’s a word we’ll talk more about later.) We were born spiritually blind, but having been born again and given spiritual sight, become aware that we live in a completely different realm.

Notice John 18:37. *“So Pilate entered his headquarters again and called Jesus and said to him, “Are you the King of the Jews?”* Now listen to Jesus’ answer to that question in verse 36. *“Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm.”* What does that mean? Ok, here’s what He is saying, listen very carefully: His kingdom has no connection to the kingdoms of this world. Jesus said in 1John 5:19 that *“the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.”* But we have been *delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son*, Colossians 1:13. The kingdom that belongs to Christ transcends the world and will triumph over the kingdoms of this world. Revelation 11:15 *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever.”*

That visible kingdom of Christ is coming. But for now the kingdom of God is not yet in its millennial form, not yet in its eternal form. For now the kingdom of Christ is a spiritual reality separate from all other kingdoms. For now His kingdom is in the hearts of those who believe in Him. But the world cannot see it, cannot comprehend it, and cannot even understand what is written in the Bible about it without the activity of God on their behalf.

Now what is that Activity? Well that brings us to the second question I was asked about Illumination. And this was also a very perceptive question.

Question #2: “Can you clarify if illumination takes place during witnessing to an unbeliever. The Holy Spirit draws unbelievers with the truth of the gospel. If we use scripture, the Holy Spirit opens their eyes to the Word? So does illumination happen at salvation?”

Again, the simple answer is Yes, in a sense. And we could leave it at that, but that’s not the whole answer, plus this is a good place for a theology lesson, so let’s not just settle for less. There are actually two questions in that one and it’s necessary to point that out because they each require a different answer.

The first question is does illumination take place when witnessing? Now if you’re talking about in the heart of the witness, then yes. Often when witnessing God will illuminate your mind to scripture that will enabled you to more effectively share the gospel. However, if you are talking about the lost individual to whom you are witnessing, then the answer would have to be no, because remember Illumination is only given to believers. But – that doesn’t mean that nothing supernatural happens. As a matter of fact, in order for that person to respond to the gospel, something miraculous is required, but in the strictest sense, it’s not illumination.

Remember I told you earlier we would talk more about that word, “regeneration”? Ok, now’s the time. ☺ This will be fun because we now have to move from one branch of theology to another. (If you need to you can go back to the notes on the first lesson and review those branches of theology.) We have been dealing with Bibliology, but now we are moving into Soteriology, which is the work of Christ.

I also told you in an earlier class to meditate on the question: “What contribution does a baby play in its birth?” And the reason I said that is because, it’s why Jesus uses birth as an illustration of salvation. The New Birth refers to the biblical doctrine of Regeneration. Paul uses the term “*Regeneration”* in Titus 3:5. *“he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit,”* It is translated from the Greek word *“paliggenesia”* (pal-ing-ghen-es-ee'-ah), and it means spiritual rebirth.

Ok, now let’s talk a little more about the necessity and the application of regeneration. Genesis tells us that God created man and gave him life. That’s GENERATION. God created man, out of the dirt. At that moment, man existed, but there was no life, just a pile of dust shaped like a man. And then God *“breathed into man the breath of life”.*  God turned the light on so to speak. God flipped the divine switch, which provided the power of life, and not just physical life, but spiritual and cognitive life as well. You see, God created man as body, soul and spirit. With the body man has physical life which gives him contact with the world below him. With the soul, (which consists of mind emotion and will), man has cognitive life which provides contact with the world around him. And with the spirit, man has contact with the world above him. That is it’s the part of man’s created makeup that allows him to know God. (None of the animals have a spirit.)

Ok now follow me here. Then God told man that if he ate of the tree in the midst of the garden in disobedience to God’s command, he would surly *“Die”*. But man sinned anyway. Now here’s an important question. Did he die? Well not physically, yet. Not cognitively, yet. That began a process of decay that did eventually lead to cognitive and physical death. But physically or psychologically he didn’t die immediately. So what did God mean when He said in Genesis 2:17 *“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”?*

Well He was referring to spiritual death. Remember, Adam had that spiritual connection, that spiritual power supply from God. But when man sinned, that connection was broken, and man died spiritually. God flipped the switch, and IMMEDIATELY, the light went out. God separated himself from Adam and man was no longer even allowed to live in God’s neighborhood. But more than that, man was spiritually dead. And from that point on, throughout the history of the world every person who has been born into the world, (with the singular exception of the Lord Jesus Christ), has been born spiritually dead. The Bible speaks to that continuing state in the New Testament. Ephesians 2:5 *“even when we were dead in our trespasses…”*Colossians 2:13 *“And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh…”*Every person born into the world is spiritually stillborn. Oh they look alive. They think they are alive, but they spiritual zombies, the walking dead.That’s DE-GENERATION

Now the third chapter of the gospel of John is the definitive text in the gospels on the new birth. Our teacher here is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, the Son of God. John 3:1-10 *“Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?’”*

So in this text, this Pharisee, Nicodemus, comes to Jesus and has a question. But the Lord already knowing why he was there, didn’t even let him get the question out of his mouth, but immediately “cut to the chase” and using birth as an illustration began talking to Nicodemus about going to heaven. Why? Why did Jesus use this particular illustration to describe salvation to Nicodemus? The Lord’s message is very simple. First of all, access to the kingdom of God is only through the new birth. Apart from that, no one enters the kingdom of God. That’s made very clear. But it still doesn’t explain the essence of the analogy. So what is it?

Well here it is and it’s so simple that most people usually miss it. The point of our Lord’s analogy is simply this: being born is not something that you have anything to do with. You didn’t have anything to do with your physical birth, nor do you have anything to do with your spiritual birth. Being born physically is something that happened to you, completely out of your control, something to which you contributed NOTHING. And being spiritually born again is exactly the same. It is something that happens to you completely out of your control and to which you contribute absolutely nothing.

In the first birth, God created you by the means of your parents. In the second case, God recreated you by means of the Holy Spirit. In both cased it was God who created you. Your parents could give you physicality, but only God could create your spirit. And being born again is an act of God by which He recreates you. It’s a new birth. And that’s the point of this simple analogy.

Now let me put it in the context of what we’ve seen. This is the point in time when, God flips the switch and that “life giving flow” of divine power surges into your spirit, and the light immediately, begins to glow. No longer are you in darkness. No longer are you spiritually dead. Divine life is infused into your dead human spirit, and suddenly your spiritual eyes are opened and the world takes on a whole new appearance and new meaning and you begin to understand things you never understood before. This we call RE-GENERATION.

Now a response that I’m sure some with have is this. “Well I thought I have to do something. I have to repent and believe.” That is true. But the question is not, is that necessary? The question is, when does that take place? I’ll introduce the answer with another question. What can a dead man do? Nothing, right? So how could a person who is spiritually dead, do something to become spiritually alive? Obviously he can do nothing.

Let me give you a visual illustration from the Bible. In John 11, Jesus’ friend Lazarus of Bethany, died and Jesus was summoned to the home of Lazarus and his sisters. Having arrived there, in the providence of God, Jesus went to the tomb of Lazarus and had the stone removed from the mouth of the grave. Then Jesus prayed, and commanded that Lazarus come out of the tomb, and he did. Now here’s the question. Why didn’t Lazarus just come on out of the tomb as soon as the stone was rolled away? (I’ll give you a minute to think about it.) Because he was, (say it) “dead”. Right? He couldn’t do anything - until - life was placed into his dead body, until life was GRANTED to him, at which time, and only at which time, he was then able to respond to the voice of Christ. An unbeliever is spiritually dead, until that moment when the Spirit of God in the twinkling of an eye comes to indwell his/her human spirit, and with Him comes Life itself, because He is “*Life”* John 14:6. The light comes on and that person can understand what just a moment before was beyond comprehension.

Here’s a definition: Regeneration is the sovereign work of God the Holy Spirit, granting life to spiritually dead individuals, so they can repent and trust in Christ. It is a term that describes a person receiving spiritually - new life, a new nature, a new disposition, a new character, a new mind from God, to which that person makes no contribution. And in the context of our overall discussion, at the moment of regeneration, a number of other elements of salvation take place such as faith, justification, adoption and others, and it’s also at that point along with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that Illumination begins.