

“Half a league, half a league, Half a league onward, All in the valley of Death Rode the six hundred. ‘Forward, the Light Brigade! Charge for the guns!’ he said. Into the valley of Death Rode the six hundred.” That’s the first stanza of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s famous poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

In 1854, about 600 British cavalymen charged into an entire Russian army. 1/3 the men were killed or injured. 2/3 their horses were lost. What led to this disaster is regarded as one of the greatest miscommunications in history. The commander of the British forces noticed a group of Russians attempting to retreat with bulky artillery guns. He needed some fast light troops to make the enemy abandon their guns. The perfect job for the Light Brigade. He wrote down this order. “Follow the enemy and try to prevent the enemy from carrying away the guns.” the captain who delivered the message never handed over the written orders. Instead with a vague sweeping hand gesture he said, “There is your enemy! There are your guns! Attack!” The Light Brigade never saw the small retreating Russian force. Instead they charged headfirst into a valley surrounded on all sides by well-entrenched Russian artillery.

A small change in orders. A little ambiguity. And over a hundred men died. God has given us a set of instructions. A small change can lead to something worse than death. Spiritual death. This is why it’s so important for us to know what God says backward and forwards. We can make sure whatever we’re told actually matches what God says. It’s so important to get it right. To learn God’s word from the source and not to change it. Receive God’s Word As Is. Because the God who gave it is bigger than us. God’s Word itself is stronger than us.

When we take a look at what is going on in Jeremiah’s day, this seems like a strange text for a “Back to School Sunday.” God’s judgment was coming to his people. For years they had ignored his prophets and followed other gods. God had had enough. Now the Babylonians were coming. God’s own instrument of destruction to rip his people from their homeland, to tear down God’s own temple. This was Jeremiah’s message to the people. A terrible warning.

Understandably, not many people liked what Jeremiah had to say. False prophets sprouted like weeds proclaiming “Peace!” “Safety!” “Nothing to worry about.” The opposite of what God said. They were turning God into some sort of local deity. Who only had control over the people in Israel. God couldn’t bring the Babylonians if he wanted to!

God responds to these false prophets. **“Am I only a God nearby, and not a God far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do not I fill heaven and earth?”** God was far bigger than these false teachers could ever comprehend. He was nearby, knowing the most intimate details of their lives. He was far away, grasping concepts and making plans larger than they could imagine. He knew what they were saying. He knew what was in their hearts.

God reveals a terrible secret about their hearts. Whether they thought to change what God said because they thought their new message was somehow kinder and more loving. Or whether they were doing it for personal gain. God says, **“They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship.”** False teaching is really teaching a god different than the true God. It’s as bad and dangerous and worshipping Baal.

Baal was the head god of the Canaanites, a people near Israel. The most common way of worshipping Baal was through temple prostitutes. In times of distress, Baal worshipers sacrificed

their own children to appease Baal. This is what the false prophet's kinder nicer teaching really was. An abomination.

We don't always like everything God has to say to us. Maybe we're not actively preaching false teachings but we all come across teachings in the Bible we would rather ignore. Maybe we don't like what the Bible says about the roles of men and women. Maybe what the Bible teaches about fellowship doesn't sound very loving to us. Even if that's not true. Even if we can bring our self to say we agree with everything the Bible says, in reality, we don't. Every time we sin, we are setting aside something God told us in the Bible. When we disobey our parents we're telling God, I don't care what you say in the 4<sup>th</sup> commandment. When we lust we tell God, "I don't care what you say in the 6<sup>th</sup> commandment." When we gossip we tell God, "I don't care what you say in the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment." In that moment, we feel we've come up with something better than God. Nothing can hide from God. Don't think you can pick and choose what to believe. Doing so sends us charging headfirst into a valley of spiritual death.

What can we do? Study God's Word so we know what he expects of us. And study God's Word so we know how much we failed. But don't stop there. Study God's Word so you can know what he's done for you.

God saw the big picture. Saw us charging forward to certain death. He sent Jesus to intervene. God set the history of the world in order so that at the right time Jesus could enter time. Jesus grew up from childhood. He read and studied the Old Testament like any of us. Unlike us, he did everything God said. And Jesus fulfilled all God's promises from the Old Testament. Jesus was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. He died for our failure to take God's word as is. He died for our disobedience, for our sins of lust, our gossiping. Jesus died for when we set God's word aside for our own desires. And if we think what Jesus did wasn't enough for us. If we think we're too far gone to be saved. God tells us in 1 John, "This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."

Sometimes what God tells us is hard for us to accept. But God knows what's best. The God who is so big he cannot be limited by the size of the universe. Yet so small he's smaller than the smallest particle of an atom. Who's so near to you he knows the number of hairs on your head. Yet so far off he could direct history to bring you to salvation. Who loved you so much his own Son died for. You can trust whatever this God tells you is good.

If all God had revealed to mankind were four words of gibberish, those would be the most important words in human history because they came from God. But God has told us so much more. He's told us about who he is. What he does. How he loves us. How he's saved us.

Here's where Christian education and back to school Sunday comes in. God's Words is the most important thing we have. It's important to know it. It's important to get it right. A small miscommunication sent the light brigade to its death. A small false teaching is dangerous. As dangerous as worshipping Baal. In fact, the small false teachings are almost more dangerous. They're harder to detect. Not one of us is in danger of converting to Baal worship, not that I'm aware of. It's the subtle teachings that can get to us. How can we stop them?

The FBI trains its agents to spot counterfeit currency. How do you think that training works? Intensive case studies of counterfeit rings? Examinations of every kind of fake bill ever found? Theoretical classes on every variation possible? No. Those agents study the real money day and night. They get to know dollar bills like the back of their hand. They know the real thing so well that when they come across a fake, they know it instantly. So learn God's Word. Study it in Bible study. Study it in church. Study it at home. And trust it works!

God is far bigger and far more loving than us. We can trust his Word is good. There's no reason to want to change it. And God's word is so powerful, we don't need to change it!

The false prophets around Jeremiah, for whatever reason, were trying to make God's Word more palatable for people. The people needed to hear God's warning. The prophets gave them false comfort instead.

We might feel the need to change God's Word sometimes. Like we need to make excuses for it. Hide bits of it. Make it more acceptable for others. This isn't loving or helping, this is harmful to them. At best it creates a faith based on false beliefs. And second, it's unnecessary! Why would we exchange God's nourishing Word for whatever useless straw we can come up with? Listen to how God describes his Word, **"Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?"**

Each of us has experienced how powerful it is. Just look at what God's Word has done in you! It brought you out of unbelief. It brought you to believe in things completely irrational. It brought you to faith kicking and screaming at your baptism. It shattered your rock hard heart. Its fire purified you for the Lord.

What makes this Word so powerful is that it's *God's* Word. And God works through his Word. When God's word is preached, the Holy Spirit is there working on your heart. When you read the Bible, the Holy Spirit is there. When you learn about things the Bible says in Sunday School, the Spirit is there. When you talk with your kids in the car about what they learned in Sunday school, the Spirit is working. And what the Spirit is doing is strengthening your faith. Growing your knowledge and love. Putting peace in your heart.

The false prophets claimed to have dreams from God. What do we do when we hear about God coming to someone outside of his word? Things like a dream from God, near-death experiences like that movie "Heaven is for Real", stories about an angel talking to someone, even a strong feeling that someone is being called by God to do something?

We don't have any reason to doubt their truthfulness. Maybe they did see an angel. We don't need to try to judge that situation. But take it for what it is, a vision, a dream, a feeling. Always compare it to God's written Word. Remember Paul's warning, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!"

As for us, God doesn't promise to speak to us in visions and feelings. True, he could if he wanted. But Luther once wondered how you can tell the difference between God talking to you in feelings and indigestion. God does promise to speak to us in his Word. There's no point exchanging the clarity of his Word for vague visions.

This is why Christian education is so important. Learn God's Word. Take God's Word as is. It comes from a God who's way bigger than us. It comes from a God who's way smarter than us. It comes from a God who loves us. His Word is more powerful than fire. It breaks through

hardened hearts. Make sure what you hear matches what God says. It makes us wise for salvation.