

Companion guide
for the video program

PIONEERS
of the
Spirit

William
Blake

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Gateway Films
VISION  **VIDEO**

Pioneers of the Spirit WILLIAM BLAKE

Background to the Video

William Blake was born in London November 28, 1757, and was baptized in St. James Church. He was raised in poverty and never rose much above it in his adult life. A renaissance man, most often described as a romantic, he was an accomplished engraver, printer, painter and writer. He experienced visions from early childhood. When he was ten he took drawing lessons at Henry Par's Academy in the Strand, and at fourteen he was apprenticed to the engraver James Basire. Three years before, in 1768, he began writing his *Poetical Sketches*. In 1779 Blake left Basire to enter the Royal Academy where he enjoyed the friendship and artistic influence of John Flaxen and Henry Fuseli. In 1782 Blake married Catherine Boucher (d. 1831). His wife worked side by side with him during their years together and assisted him in the important work of coloring his copper-plate prints with water colors.

Some Works

Blake's first engraving was *Joseph of Arimathea Among the Rocks of Albion*, dating from 1773. He wrote *An Island in the Moon* in 1784 and *Tiriel* and the *Book of Thel* in 1789. These works were followed in 1792 by *A Song of Liberty*, and between 1792 and 1821 he wrote/published, among other things, *The Gates of Paradise* (for children) (1793), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1794), *Milton, a Poem* (1804), *Everlasting Gospel* (1818), and *The Ghost of Abel* (1821).

Some of Blake's most famous art works are *The Witch of Endor Raising the Spirit of Samuel* (1783), watercolor illustrations for Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1785), *The Last Supper* (1799) exhibited at the Royal Academy, and *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* (1805)

Blake's *Illustrations to the Book of Job* (1821-1825, published 1826) is considered his greatest work. His engravings for Dante were begun in 1827, and he died August 12th of the same year.

The Blakes lived in London all their lives except for a brief period — 1800-1803 — which they spent at Felpham on the southern coast of England. Blake ceased to write poetry after 1818, devoting his time to his great work of illustrations for Dante's *Divine Comedy* and twenty-one plates for the *Book of Job*.

The Man

"Oh why was I born with a different face?
Why was I not born like the rest of my race?"

William Blake perceived himself as different from other men — a difference that he would be aware of throughout his life. Although often described as a mystic and visionary, some believe this impression arose more from the fact that he wrote in the style of the Hebrew prophets. His religion, which excluded dogma, has been called a religion of art. For a while he was a member of the Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem in London. Some idea of his beliefs can be found in his written works: *All Religions Are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*.

The opening to his *Songs of Innocence* gives some feel for his approach to life (original spelling):

Piping down the valleys wild,
 Piping songs of pleasant glee,
 On a cloud I saw a child,
 And he laughing said to me:
 "Pipe a song about a Lamb!"
 So I piped with merry cheer.
 "Piper, pipe that song again,"
 So I piped, he wept to hear.

"Drop thy pipe, thy happy pipe;
 Sing thy songs of happy cheer-
 So I sung the same again,
 While he wept with joy to hear.

"Piper, sit thee down and write
 In a book, that all may read."
 So he vanish'd from my sight,
 And I pluck'd a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,
 And I stain'd the water clear,
 And I wrote my happy songs
 Every child may joy to hear.

Blake's Influence

Blake was a counterweight to the rationalism that was becoming widespread throughout Europe and England. He presented a world of the spirit based on the beauty of nature. He also gave the world a new art form that paved the way for the innovative work and free expression of future artists, especially for the Pre-Raphaelites.

Our materialistic culture benefits from a good dose of "spirituality" so long as it remains in the Christian context. Blake's works with biblical themes continue to inspire us because of their other-worldliness and their biblical basis.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why was William Blake important in his time?
2. What do you think is Blake's artistic value today?
3. What importance has William Blake for Christians today?
4. Why does the Bible naturally inspire great artistic creativity?
5. In what ways do Blake's images reflect the biblical ideas he tried to represent?
6. Have Blake's works influenced today's religious art?

For Further Reading

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