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STUDIES

IN THE

SCRIPTURES

“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39

EDITOR: Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

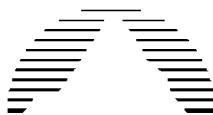
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Studies in the Scriptures appeared without interruption from 1922 to 1953, each issue including six to eight articles addressing a different topic in a series. While virtually unknown to the Christian world when he died, his writings continue to grow in their influence upon God's people around the world, through their clarity, careful exposition, and Christ-centeredness.

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IDENTIFICATION OF THE GODLY

For the past few years, we have endeavored to help some of God's unestablished children by devoting one article annually (under this title) to the particular end of resolving their uncertainty. In order that they may recognize their spiritual portrait, we seek to describe one or other of those features of the regenerate which the Holy Spirit has drawn in the Scriptures. So far from despising those who are deeply exercised as to their actual state, refusing to "give themselves the benefit of the doubt," we admire their caution. God has exhorted His people to "make [their] calling and election sure" (2Pe 1:10), and one of the ways we may set about doing so is to prayerfully and humbly compare our hearts and lives with those marks of grace, or fruits of the Spirit, which are delineated in the Bible. God's Word is likened unto a "glass" in which we may behold ourselves (Jam 1:23-24) and perceive what we are by nature, and what we have been made by grace. May each of us be granted eyes to see ourselves as that divine Mirror represents us.

"Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word...It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes...I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Psa 119:67, 71, 75). We link these three verses together because they treat of the same subject, namely the attitude of the heart of one who had been afflicted by God. Each of them breathes the language of a gracious soul, and not that of a natural man. Each of them acknowledges the beneficial effects of sanctified trials. Each of them evidences a humble heart, for so far from murmuring at God's dispensations—unpleasant though they be to flesh and blood—there is a grateful acknowledgement of their benevolent design. Each of them is a confession made not while smarting under the rod, but *after* it has done its appointed work. If our readers can truthfully make such language their own, then have they good reason to conclude they are bound in the same "bundle of life" (1Sa 25:29) as David.

The first is the expression of an *honest* heart, for it freely owns that before affliction he had "gone astray." Since the "flesh" still remains in the Christian's heart, he is very prone to stray from God; yea, unless he be diligent in watching and praying against temptation and daily mortifying his lusts, he is certain to do so. That evil tendency is much stimulated by temporal success, for then we are far more apt to indulge the flesh than deny it. "But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; *then* he forsook God" (Deu 32:15). "I spake unto thee in thy prosperity; but thou saidst, I will not hear" (Jer 22:21). By such backsliding, we bring down upon ourselves the rod of God—to curb further excesses of carnality, and to drive us back into the paths of righteousness. God often sends a worm to smite the gourd of our creature comforts (Jon 4:7), and prosperity is followed by adversity; but if that affliction be blest to us, then do we keep the Word as we did not previously (Luk 2:19).

The second is the breathing of a *grateful* heart: "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (Psa 119:71). Very different is the sentiment of the natural man. Scripture declares, "Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth" (Job 5:17), but the world imagines that happy is he who is exempt from trials and troubles. Which do you agree with, my reader? Yet it is one thing to give a general assent to the inspired declaration, "Blessed is the man whom thou chastenest, O LORD, and teachest him out of thy law" (Psa 94:12), but it is quite another to learn by experience the benefits of affliction. To be meekly reconciled to our tribulations is a great mercy, but to have personal proof that, though the medicine be unpalatable, its effects are salutary, is yet better. Such is the result in those who are "exercised" under the chastening hand of Their Father (Heb 12:11). "The Philistines could not understand Samson's riddle—how 'Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness' (Jdg 14:14). As little can the world comprehend the fruitfulness of the Christian's trials: how his gracious Lord sweetens the 'bitter' waters of Marah (Exo 15:23)"—Charles Bridges (1794-1869).

"It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (Psa 119:71). God has many ways of afflicting. In the context, David mentions those who had opposed and maligned him. At the time, he may have felt it keenly, but later, he realized it was a mercy. It is good for us when *we* have solid reason to make this acknowledgment. What is our chief "good"? Is it not the enjoyment of God? Then how thankful should we be for anything which draws us nearer unto Him! "LORD, in trouble have they visited thee, they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them" (Isa 26:16). God is then sought unto more earnestly and persistently. When settled on our lees, our devotions are very apt to become formal and mechanical, but when our nest is disturbed, we "*pour out* a prayer" or a "secret speech" (margin)—i.e. the groanings of the heart. Sanctified afflictions wean us from the creature, make the conscience more tender, call into exercise our

graces, and quicken us in the path of duty. If we can discover such beneficial effects, must we not exclaim, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted"!

The third is the language of *discernment*. "I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are *right*, and that thou in *faithfulness* hast afflicted me" (Psa 119:75)—"judgments" here refer not (as often in the Psalms) to the equitable laws of God, but to His governmental dealings—in punishing the wicked or in correcting His people. Nor was David speaking of the knowledge of carnal reason, but of that which faith and a spiritual experience supplies. He condemned himself, acknowledging that his waywardness had called for the rod. When the empty professor is sorely afflicted, he says, "What have I done to deserve this?" Others less rebellious, but equally self-righteous, ask, "Why should I be singled out as a mark for adversity?" Very different are the sentiments of the godly: they *vindicate* the Lord. So far from deeming themselves to be dealt with unjustly, or even harshly, they exonerate the hand that smites them. The wicked recognize not the One who is dealing with them, looking no farther than secondary causes or human instruments. But the eyes of faith behold Him who is invisible: not only as a provider and comforter, but also as a chastiser and afflicter; and that, not only in love, but in righteousness: "Thy judgments are *right*."

"Thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me." Numerous sermons have been preached upon the faithfulness of God and many pieces written upon this divine perfection, yet few have preserved the balance thereon. It requires to be shown that God is not only true to His Word in making good His promises, but also in fulfilling His threatenings; faithful not only in providing for His people, but also in dealing with their follies. We frequently hear of God's covenant-faithfulness, but we are not so often reminded that *chastisement* is one of the articles in His covenant. "If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments...Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes...My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips" (Psa 89:30-34). "Our Father is no Eli: He will not suffer His children to sin without rebuke"—Charles H. Spurgeon (1834-1892). Therefore, it is their duty to *own* His integrity while enduring His faithful discipline. This is what David here did: he acknowledged that God was fulfilling His covenant engagement, and he made that avowal not sullenly, but thankfully; yea, he made it adoringly, for he knew that God also had his welfare in view.

Now, my reader, measure yourself by what has been pointed out above. Do *you* say, "I will bear the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him" (Mic 7:9)? Have you learned by experience that affliction is made a school to God's people, in which they learn many valuable lessons—both about themselves and God, and about their duties and privileges? Have you discovered by first-hand acquaintance that chastisement is a beneficial medicine to subdue pride, purge of carnality, and heal backslidings? Has the rod recovered you from your wanderings? Can you say from the heart, "It is *good* for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn [experimentally] thy statutes" (Psa 119:71)? Do you freely own that God's providential dealings with you—His "judgments"—are *right*: just and equitable? Yea, do you feel that God has dealt far more leniently than your "iniquities deserve" (Ezr 9:13)? Do you aver that God is faithful, not only in Himself, but in smiting you? Then you have Scriptural ground for concluding that a miracle of grace has been wrought in your soul.

THE PRAYERS OF THE APOSTLES

51. 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17

We frequently take occasion in these pages to emphasize the importance and need of preserving *the balance* of truth, for in so doing, we are really calling attention to the method followed by the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures, and that cannot be ignored without our suffering serious loss. There is a most blessed mingling together in the Word of those different elements which are so essential unto a well-rounded Christian life—as in the natural world [where] God has provided various kinds of food suited to the several needs of our bodies. A striking example of this is found in the immediate context of that prayer, which is here to engage our attention. In 2 Thessalonians 2, verse 13 and 14, one of the fundamental articles of our most holy faith is expressed; yet not in a cold and formal manner, but rather as that which occasioned deep and constant thanksgiving. Next, in verse 15, the corresponding duty is enforced, the obligations which such a disclosure of divine grace devolves upon the favoured objects and recipients of it. Then follows our prayer, which, as we shall see, really grows out of verses 13 to 15. Thus we have here: doctrinal declaration, practical exhortation, and earnest supplication—and *that* is what both preachers and hearers should ever blend together, and in that order.

What has just been pointed out is too weighty for us to dismiss without a further word of amplification. After describing the fearful judgment which God sends upon those who receive not His truth in the love of it, the apostle's mind turned unto those who were the objects of the divine favour, which moved him to exclaim, "But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2Th 2:13). That should ever be the effect upon a child of God as he solemnly contemplates the doom of unbelievers: hearty thanksgiving should issue from his soul at the realization that the Lord eternally set His heart upon an elect company whom He appointed unto deliverance from the wrath to come. But what we would here particularly note is that God's eternal election does not preclude effectual calling, nor does either render needless the exercise of our moral agency: those "beloved of the Lord"—all of them, yet none other—are "chosen...to salvation *through* sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." Those three things must never be separated.

First, from the beginning, "chosen...to salvation": God's sovereign and eternal decree being the originating cause of salvation. Second, that decree is fulfilled "through" or by means of the "sanctification of the Spirit," the reference being to His quickening operation, when by the miracle of regeneration, He sets them apart from those who are dead in trespasses and sins. Third, God's eternal decree is only accomplished when the subjects of it personally appropriate the truth of the Gospel unto themselves. While in their unregenerate state, they were incapable of any saving "belief of the truth," for their corrupt hearts were hostile to it, in love with error and sin. But when the miracle of grace is wrought within them, their enmity against God is slain, and the Gospel is welcomed as exactly suited to their dire need, and is cordially embraced by them. Thus, they spell out their election and evince their effectual call by the Holy Spirit through their "belief of the truth." Thereby, the beloved of the Lord are brought to concur with God's will in their salvation in the way of His appointing. So far from the elect being saved—whether they believe or no—they do not enter into God's salvation except through their "belief of the truth."

Further, the regeneration of God's beloved—their belief of the truth, and their initial participation in God's so great salvation—does not render them unfit subjects for exhortation; on the contrary, their accountability must be enforced and their moral agency brought into exercise. Those who have received spiritual life require instructing, calling upon, to "stir up the gift of God, which is in thee" (2Ti 1:6), and urged to perform their duties. Accordingly, we find the apostle at once bidding them, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle" (2Th 2:15). Paul did not deem such an exhortation "legalistic," nor useless, because assured that "ye both do and *will* do the things which we command you" (2Th 3:4). The operations of divine grace do not set aside the discharge of human responsibility, but are an equipping thereunto: our concurrence with God is required unto the end of our earthly course. Yet such exhorting of the saints thereunto is far from implying any sufficiency in them to comply therewith in their own strength. Paul knew full well his order would prevail little with them without the divine blessing upon the same; therefore did he add supplication thereunto.

“Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, Comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work” (2Th 2:16-17). As we have pointed out on former occasions, these Thessalonian saints were enduring a great fight of affliction from without; and therefore did their ministerial father here seek to occupy them with the rich compensations and provisions which the divine Lovers of their souls had made for their peace and cheer. They had been experiencing many “persecutions and tribulations” (2Th 1:4); and therefore did he make earnest intercession for them that they might be further comforted of God and energized by His grace unto the close of life. Having already considered the setting or connections of this prayer, it remains for us to ponder, first, its *addressees*, or the objects to whom it is made; second, its *grounds of confidence* for an answer; third, its specific *requests*; and seeking to make application of the whole unto ourselves today.

“Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself, and God, even our Father” are the Addressees. In the original, there is an emphasis which is not preserved in our more euphonious translation, the Greek reading, “Now Himself Lord, our Jesus Christ, and God and Father our.” First, let us carefully notice the fact that here is still another instance where prayer is made directly unto the Redeemer. While it is incumbent upon us to approach the Father and direct our petitions unto Him in and through the mediation of our great High Priest—owning the fact that there is no other way and means of access to Him—yet it is equally our privilege and duty to address ourselves immediately to the Son, that *He* may receive the honour and homage which are His due as being one with the Father; and also that we should acknowledge Him as the purchaser and bestower of all our spiritual blessings. The “which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation” that immediately follows takes in both the Son and the Father, and since we are indebted to the One as much as to the Other, Each is to be equally loved, revered, and magnified by us. Especially should faith be acted upon both the Father and the Son in a season of persecution and tribulation since we are assured that Both have our best interests at heart.

Second, let us carefully attend to the manner in which the Son is here presented to our notice: “Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself.” There is an order and emphasis here which are sadly lacking in modern ministry. The apostle declared, “We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus *the Lord*” (2Co 4:5), “preaching peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)” (Act 10:36). Christ is “Lord” in two ways. First, by that right which pertains to Him as the Creator, which right belongs to Him equally with the Father and the Spirit. As the Creator of the world, He is the Sovereign of it, as appeared by the winds and waves obeying His word. Second, by a new right of dominion, which belongs to Him as Redeemer. This is partly by divine donation: “All power is *given* unto me in heaven and in earth” (Mat 28:18); “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God *hath made* that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Act 2:36); having “put all things under his feet” (Eph 1:22). It is also His right by purchase and conquest: “For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord both of the dead and living” (Rom 14:9). By His death He merited; and by His resurrection, He attained unto the exalted station of universal dominion—“upholding all things by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3 and compare Rev 1:18).

By a *passive subjection*, all creatures in heaven and in earth are under the power and dominion of the Son of God and our Redeemer, as will openly appear at the last great Day, when in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, “of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phi 2:10-11). And therefore are even the kings and great men of the earth now bidden to “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling” (Psa 2:10-11). Likewise, is everyone who hears the Gospel required to do so, for therein are Christ’s dignities and rights made known unto men, and those who “*obey not* the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power” (2Th 1:8-9). Thus, the first duty of the evangelist is to press upon his hearers the claims of Christ: calling upon them to throw down “the weapons of [their] warfare” (2Co 10:4) against Him and submit to His scepter, to cease serving sin and Satan and yield themselves to His sway. Upon His entrance into this world, the divine announcement was made, “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord” (Luk 2:11), for it is only as the throne of the heart be freely offered unto Christ that He becomes the “Saviour” of any one—i.e. of those who cease being rebels against Him.

That which distinguishes Christians from non-Christians is that they have surrendered themselves to the authority of Christ: that He is their Lord by *voluntary submission*. “But first gave their own selves to the Lord” (2Co 8:5)—that is, they repudiated the world, the flesh, and the devil, took His yoke upon them, and

solemnly covenanted to henceforth love and serve Him alone (Isa 26:13). The word to Christians is, "As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus *the Lord*, so walk ye in him" (Col 2:6). They have intelligently and freely accepted Him as their Lord, renouncing all other "lords" and idols, enthroning Him in their affections, and desiring Him to rule their lives. That is exactly what a true conversion consists of: a turning from sin to Christ, a ceasing from self-pleasing, to be in subjection to His authority; and the sins of all such (and of none other) are pardoned as they trust in His blood. That is the order in our present verse: "Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself." He is not "*our* Jesus Christ" until He has first been received as *Lord*! That is ever the order of Scripture: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luk 1:46-47). "The everlasting kingdom of our [1] Lord and [2] Saviour Jesus Christ" (2Pe 1:11). "Through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2Pe 2:20). "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2Pe 3:18).

Man, with his invariable perversity, has reversed *God's* order. Modern evangelism urges giddy worldlings, with sense of their lost condition, to "accept Christ as their personal Saviour"; and when such "converts" prove unsatisfactory to the "churches," special meetings are arranged where they are pressed to "consecrate themselves unto Christ as Lord." Christ must be received according to God's appointed terms: He is "the author of eternal salvation unto all them that *obey* him" (Heb 5:9). But the heart-language of all who despise and reject Him is, "We will not have this man to reign over us" (Luk 19:14). In contrast, of the saints it is said, "Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself." To which the apostle here added, "And God, even our Father." He too stands in a double relation to us: our "God" by sovereign dominion, and our "Father" by gracious regeneration. The two divine Persons were here conjointly addressed to evince Their co-equality and to teach us that we must not look to and rest in the Mediator unto the exclusion or even the neglect of exercising a lively faith upon the One who sent Him. Having referred first to the One whose work on the soul is the more immediate, the apostle guards against giving the impression that the Father is any less deeply interested in our welfare than is the Son.

"Which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace." Those words reveal the various *grounds* for the apostle's confidence that an answer would be granted to the petitions which follow. They are to be regarded as "the grounds of audience and success," as they are well styled by Thomas Manton (1620-1677)—from whose sermons on this prayer we shall draw in the sequel. This clause is intimately connected with the preceding one, as its opening "Which" intimates, for that pronoun includes both the Persons here addressed. First, "Now our Lord Jesus Christ himself." In this divine adoration, the apostle would exalt *Him* in the esteem of the saints as co-equal with the Father. The emphatic "Himself" at the beginning of the sentence was designed to contrast *His* almighty power and infinite love with the comparatively feeble affection which Paul bore unto the suffering Thessalonians and the ministerial assistance he sought to render them, as well as with *their* inability to "stand fast" in their own strength. Second, "And God, even our Father." He too had their welfare equally at heart and must be given equal place in their thoughts and affections as commended to them by the endearing "*our*"—*our* God and Father.

"Which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace." Taking the three together, we may observe what a strong emphasis is here laid upon the fact that the saints' consolations and comforts proceed from pure and bounteous benignity. First, we are shown that divine love is their fountain or original; then we are told the same are "given" us, and nothing is more free than a gift; and last, they are plainly declared to be "through grace." Therein the apostle found encouragement and emboldenment to seek further blessings for these saints. And thus, too, it needs to be with us when about to pray. Nothing is more assuring to the heart than the realization that we are approaching the bounteous One "that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not" (Jam 1:5). Nothing is better suited to dispel our doubts and fears than the knowledge that it is at "the throne of *grace*" (Heb 4:16) we are invited to boldly draw nigh. Well suited is such a throne unto beggars, who have no merits of their own. Equally fitted for the ill-deserving and defiled, who come to confess their sins. Let all such recall that they are coming to "the God of all grace" (1Pe 5:10), whose mercy is free, infinite, and "endureth for ever."

Considering separately or distinctly these grounds of assurance for a hearing at the Mercyseat, we may view the divine love as the cause, and the everlasting consolation and good hope as the effects of the same. "Which hath loved us" refers to both the Son and the Father. In the economy of redemption, the love of the Father is first, for so far from Christ having procured the love of the Father unto His people, it was His love which furnished Him for them. "For God so loved the world, that *he* gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (Joh 3:16). The love of God unto His

elect is the spring of all their blessings. It was His love which chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated [them] unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself" (Eph 1:4-5). It was His love which provided a Saviour for them: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1Jo 4:10). It was His love which gave the Holy Spirit to quicken us: "Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee" (Jer 31:3). It is His love which chastens us when we sin (Heb 12:6), and which suffers nothing to separate us from Him in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:39).

Equally is the love of the Son made manifest in His redemption of His people. It was His love for them which made Him willing to become their surety, to take upon Himself the form of a servant, and to be made in the likeness of sin's flesh. It was His love for them which moved Him to take upon Himself their debts and discharge their obligations, being made under the Law that He might render perfect obedience unto its precepts in their behalf, and suffer its awful curse in their stead. "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Eph 5:25). "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Joh 15:13). How we need to pray with the apostle that we may "*know* the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge" (Eph 3:19)—that is, that we may be constantly occupied with it, that we may have more spiritual conceptions of it, be nourished by and swallowed up in it. Says the Saviour of our souls, "As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you" (Joh 15:9): particularly should that be remembered as we draw nigh to Him in prayer. What liberty of approach and freedom of utterance are mine when I realize I am about to petition the One "who loved me, and gave himself for *me*" (Gal 2:20), and that His love is ever the same toward me!

Though it falls not strictly within the scope of our present verse, yet for the benefit of young preachers, we will devote one paragraph to the love of the Spirit, for which we are as much indebted as for the Father's and the Son's. "*God is love*" (1Jo 4:8, 16) is to be understood equally of each of the three Persons. In Romans 15:30, distinct mention is made of "the love of the Spirit," yet how little is ever heard of the same! The entire work and ministry of the Spirit unto the saints is one of fathomless and amazing love. It is in love that He sought them out when they were dead in sin. It is in love that He quickened them into newness of life, for nothing but love could have moved Him to take pity upon such vile and leprous creatures. It is in incomprehensible love that He takes up His abode within our hearts. What a marvel that the Holy Spirit should indwell such worms of the earth and make our bodies His temples! It is in love that He bears with our infirmities and "maketh intercession for us" (Rom 8:26-27). Infinitely patient is His long-suffering unto us. It is in love that He bears witness with our spirits that we are the sons of God. It is in love that He teaches, guides, strengthens, fructifies, and preserves us unto the end. Then let us be far more on our guard against *grieving* this Lover of our souls.

"Which hath loved us." *That* is what the apostle eyed first as he was about to make supplication for those tried saints; and that is what *our* faith must never lose sight of, for nothing else will so keep our hearts warm and our affections fresh unto God. All of God's dispensations unto and all of His dealings with us should be considered in the light of His infinite and unchanging love for us. Yet that is only possible as *faith* is daily exercised thereon. When His providences are contemplated and interpreted by carnal reason, unbelief will cloud our vision, and we give the devil an advantage to inject into our minds poisonous and blasphemous aspersions against God. It is one of the Enemy's favourite devices to induce a Christian to entertain doubts of God's love toward him, especially so in a time of trial or tribulation; and nought but "the shield of faith" (Eph 6:16) can stop his fiery darts. Faith resists his evil suggestions, looks away from the things seen, and lays hold upon the declarations and promises of Him who has covenanted with his people: "I will not turn away from them, to do them good" (Jer 32:40). *There* is solid ground to rest upon amid the storms of life. There is an unfailing cordial for the fainting heart.

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence*

He hides a smiling face.

—William Cowper (1731-1800)

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

31. Jericho

We have now arrived at what is perhaps the most interesting and instructive incident recorded in this book, namely, the fall of Jericho, which appears to have been the principal stronghold of the Canaanites. Up to this point, everything had been more or less preliminary and preparatory; now the real task before them must be faced and tackled: the Canaanites must be dispossessed if Israel were to occupy their goodly heritage. They had already received very great encouragement in connection with the Jordan, where the Lord had so signally undertaken for them by the might of His power. Having attended to the important duty of circumcision and having kept the feast of the Passover, they were now fitted and furnished to go forward. What a parable was that of the beginning of the Christian life! Having been made the subject of the miracle of regeneration, plucked as a brand from the burning, the sinner saved by divine grace now enters upon a new life—one as radically different in character as Israel's after they left the wilderness behind. Having obediently submitted to the ordinance of baptism and fed on the antitypical Lamb, the believer is not to settle upon his oars, but is called upon to engage in spiritual warfare and glorify God "as a good soldier of Jesus Christ" (2Ti 2:3), serving under His banner and doing exploits, overcoming his foes and entering into a present possession of his inheritance.

Jericho was a frontier town and key city. It was a powerful fortress barring Israel's ingress. Its capture was indispensable before any progress could be made by Israel in conquering and occupying the land of Canaan. It was the enemy's leading fastness, which doubtless they considered to be quite impregnable; and the destruction of it would not only be a great encouragement unto Israel, but must still further dismay the remaining Canaanites. In its overthrow, we perceive how different are the ways of God from man's, and with what ease His accomplishes His purposes. Here we behold how futile are the efforts of those who oppose Him, and how worthless the refuges in which they vainly seek shelter. In this memorable episode, we are taught how the people of God are to act if they would have Him show Himself strong in their behalf: how that carnal scheming and worldly methods are given no place; but instead, faith, obedience, courage, and patience must be exercised, if they would obtain the victory over their foes. In what is here to be before us, we see not Israel acting on the defensive, seeking to protect themselves from the attacks of others, but rather under divine orders, taking the initiative and assuming the offensive, which tells us there is an *active side* to the Christian warfare, as well as a passive one—something which is too often forgotten by many of us.

We must not lose sight of the close connection between what is now to be before us and that which engaged our attention in the preceding article. There we beheld Joshua alone by Jericho, apparently reconnoitering that fortress and noting its formidable strength—compare our remarks on chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, where Israel was required to take full stock of the flooded river which barred their entrance into Canaan. While so engaged, Israel's leader was suddenly confronted with a mysterious Personage "with his sword drawn in his hand" who, upon being asked, "Art thou for us, or for our adversaries?" replied, "Nay; but as captain of the host of the LORD am I now come" (Jos 5:13-14). Just as Jehovah had appeared to Moses at the burning bush, before he entered upon his great task of leading the children of Israel out of the house of bondage and Moses received assurance that God had "come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exo 3:8), so Joshua was then given promise that an all-sufficient Leader would take charge of Israel's host and conduct them to complete victory. That we *should* link together Exodus 3:1-10, and Joshua 5:13-15, is intimated by the fact that on each occasion, the appearing of the Lord was marked by the command, "Loose thy shoe" (Jos 5:15) ["Put off thy shoes from off thy feet" (Exo 3:5)].

As stated in our last article, the second main division of the book of Joshua commences as chapter 5, verse 13 (that section which has for its theme, *The Conquest of the Land*); and therefore, it behoves us to pay extra close attention to its *opening* verses. The incident described therein is not only introductory to what follows in the next six chapters, but it furnishes the key to their right interpretation. The appearing of the Angel of the Lord unto Moses at the burning bush had a deeper design than the strengthening of his heart, being a symbolical representation of the people of God then—in "the iron furnace" (Deu 4:20) and the "furnace of affliction" (Isa 48:10)—and that the Lord Himself was present with them in it: "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them" (Isa 63:9, and compare Mat 25:36;

Act 9:10-13). But in Joshua 5:13-15, the Lord is viewed as no longer suffering in and with His people, but stands forth as their Captain, to command and lead them in battle. It was plain intimation that this was not Israel's quarrel in which they should seek divine assistance; but Jehovah's own quarrel, and Israel was but a division of *His* "host." The wars of Israel are expressly called "the wars of the LORD" (Num 21:14). Israel's destruction of the Canaanites was no private vengeance, but divine, because their iniquities were now come to the "full" (Gen 15:16; Lev 18:25-28).

Far more was involved here than appears on the surface; and it is only by carefully comparing Scripture with Scripture that we can discover what was really taking place behind the scenes. The dispossession of the Canaanites from their native land should cause us no uneasiness, for it was no unrighteous act on Israel's part; rather were they made the instruments of God's holy judgment upon those who had persisted so long in their abominations that nought remained but their extermination. We need to look above the human side of things here, and contemplate them in the light of that expression, "the wars of the LORD" (Num 21:14), for that is what they were. It was more than human forces which were involved on both sides, namely, divine and infernal Jehovah Himself was now waging war upon Satan and his hosts. The Canaanites were devoted to idolatry and necromancy, using divination, being enchanter, witches, charmers, consultants with familiar spirits; and as Moses had announced, "because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee" (Deu 18:9-14)! As the apostle also informs us, "the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to *devils*, and not to God" (1Co 10:20). God, then, was here waging war upon the powers of darkness, and—as was evident at the Red Sea—none could withstand *Him*.

The subject is admittedly mysterious, yet sufficient light is cast upon it by the Word of God to enable us to perceive something of its real character. When man apostatized from God, he became the captive of the devil; and when Christ came here to effect the redemption of His enslaved people, He had first to conquer their captor. The Gospels make it clear that Christ's conflict was far more than one with men who hated Him, namely, against the prince of this world—it was Satan who "entered...into Judas" (Luk 22:3) and moved him to perform his dastardly work. The "strong man armed" (Luk 11:21) kept his palace, and his goods were in peace. But when "a stronger than he shall come upon him," He overcame him and took from him all his armour which he trusted, and "divideth his spoils" (Luk 11:21-22, and compare Isa 53:12); "that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death" (Heb 2:14); "having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col 2:15). Likewise, His soldiers are bidden to "put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil"; the reason given being, "for we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph 6:11-12)! How little is this realized!

"Now Jericho was straitly shut up because of the children of Israel: none went out, and none came in" (Jos 6:1). This at once arrests our attention. They were not willing to issue forth and fight against Israel in the open. The fear of the Lord was upon them. What Jehovah wrought for His obedient people at the Jordan had struck terror into their souls. They were made to realize that One was with them who could not be withstood. "And it came to pass, when all the kings of the Amorites, which were on the side of Jordan westward, and all the kings of the Canaanites, which were by the sea, heard that the LORD had dried up the waters of Jordan from before the children of Israel, until we were passed over, that their *heart melted*, neither was there spirit in them any more, because of the children of Israel" (Jos 5:1). Consequently, their hope now lay in the height and strength of the walls of Jericho. There they sheltered, yet in a spirit of uneasiness. When there is an ungrieved Spirit in the midst of God's people, not only are *they* made the subjects of His quickening, fructifying, and comforting influences, but those that are *without* are awed by His power! It is the absence of His restraint which explains the present lawlessness of society.

"Now Jericho was straitly shut up." The attentive reader will observe that the margin has it, "did shut up and was shut up." It is an expressive emphasis in the Hebrew, like dying "thou shalt surely die" (Gen 2:17) and "in blessing I will bless thee" (Gen 22:17). All the passages of ingress and egress were closed: the heavy gates barred, the inhabitants shut in by the massive walls. But what could *such* measures avail them? What are bolts and bars unto Him who can make the iron gate of a city "[open] to them of his own accord" (Act 12:10), and cause "all the doors" of a prison to be opened when He pleases (Act 16:26)? Verily, "except the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain" (Psa 127:1). How little is that apprehended by this materialistic generation, who give little or no thought at all unto the agency of God in human affairs! What a rude awakening awaits them at the moment of death, and in the Day to come, when

it shall be made to appear before an assembled universe that any other refuge than Christ Himself in which sinners sought shelter, stood them in no better stead in the hour of trial than Jericho did the Canaanites!

Jericho was one of those well-secured cities of Canaan; of which it is said, "The cities are walled, and very great" (Num 13:28); and which, to the carnal spies, appeared utterly unassailable (Deu 1:28). It was therefore a *challenge to faith*—just as was Jordan. God did not work that first miracle before Israel's faith was put to the proof, but *afterward*. The priests bearing the ark were required, at the divine command, "When ye are come to the brink of the water of Jordan, ye shall stand still in Jordan" (Jos 3:8); and it was not until they had complied with that order that the Lord wrought so wondrously for them: "And as they that bare the ark were come unto Jordan, and the feet of the priests that bare the ark were dipped *in* the brim of the water...That the waters which came down from above stood and rose up upon an heap" (Jos 3:15-16). So it was at Jericho. The Captain of the Lord's host had declared He would undertake for Israel, yet here was this citadel barred against them! Its gates were not opened by divine hand, nor was its king panic-stricken so that he surrendered to them. No; "Jericho was straitly shut up." *That* was what confronted outward sight! So it is in our experiences today. "According to your faith be it unto you" (Mat 9:29—it is in response to *that*, God works.

"And the LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into thine hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour" (Jos 6:2). Very blessed is that. The Lord graciously made free with His servant, and before the campaign opened, assured him of the complete success of the same. But let us not fail to call to mind that which had immediately preceded this favour, for there is an inseparable moral connection between them, which it behoves us to note. Joshua himself, the priests, and the whole nation had exercised an exemplary obedience to the divine will and had manifested a real concern for the divine glory—in circumcising the men and in celebrating the Passover feast. It is ever God's way to make free with us when everything is right between Him and our souls. Thus we have illustrated and exemplified here yet another effect that always follows when there is an ungrieved Spirit in the midst of a company of saints. Not only does He awe those who are without, but divine communications are freely vouchsafed unto those who are within! That ought to be a normal and regular experience, and not an occasional and extraordinary one. As the Lord Jesus declared, "He that hath my commandments, and *keepeth them*, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will *manifest* myself to him" (Joh 14:21).

Above, we have said that this confronting of Jericho "straitly shut up" was a challenge to faith, and that God acts "according to" our faith. But faith must ever have a foundation to rest upon, and here one was afforded the same. That word, "See, I have given into thine hand Jericho," was instructive and emphatic. "See" was a definite call to view things with the eye of the spirit rather than that of the body: contemplate this obstacle by faith and not by carnal reason. Just as at the Red Sea, the word was, "Stand still, and *see* the salvation of the LORD, which he *will* shew to you to day:...The LORD shall fight for you" (Exo 14:13-14). Yet they saw not that "salvation" or deliverance *outwardly* until they had, in faith and obedience, complied with the divine order, "speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward" (Exo 14:15). They were required to "see" God's promised deliverance by faith before it was accomplished unto outward sight! It was the same thing here: "See, I have given into thine hand Jericho." Have you, my reader, *thus* "seeth" that blessed One of whom previously you had only "heard" (Job 42:5)? Have you thus "[seen] him who is invisible" (Heb 11:27)? Have you thus "seen" your final and complete victory over sin and death? Have you thus *seen* that place which your Redeemer has gone to prepare for you? That is what faith is: "the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen" (Heb 11:1)!

But let us now direct attention unto a different aspect of this gracious message of Jehovah's unto Joshua and emphasize another word in it: "See, I have *given* into thine hand Jericho." That needs to be carefully attended to in this connection by some of our readers, for it refutes one of the principal errors of the "Dispensationalists," who declare that under the old covenant, God dealt with his people in an entirely different manner from what He now does with His saints under the new covenant—insisting that throughout the Mosaic economy, everything was regulated by law and strict justice, whereas Christians are dealt with by grace and are not under the law. What crass ignorance such teaching betrays! Teaching which is expressly disproved by Romans 4:1-8, and the whole of Hebrews 11. From the days of Abel until the end of the world, God has only one way of salvation for lost sinners: by grace, through faith, not through works. Yet it is a grace which ever maintains the requirements of holiness and enforces human responsibility, as it is a faith which manifests its reality and spirituality by performing good works. The temporal inheritance

that was bestowed upon the nation of Israel proceeded as truly from divine bounty, or free grace, as does the eternal inheritance of the Church. Necessarily so, for the earthly Canaan was a figure and emblem of the heavenly Canaan, and the type perfectly conformed to the anti-type. It was a divine *gift* and not a wage which Israel earned by their own efforts.

ENJOYING GOD'S BEST

Having shown at some length in the preceding articles that the Old and New Testament alike teach there is such a thing as entering into and enjoying God's best—that if we meet His just requirements, He will make our way prosperous—we must turn now to the darker side of the subject, and face the fact that it is sadly possible to *miss* God's best and bring down upon ourselves adversity. God has not only promised “no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly” (Psa 84:11), but He has also plainly informed us, “Your iniquities have turned away these things, and your sins have withholden good things from you” (Jer 5:25). Upon which John Gill (1697-1771) said, “These mercies were kept back from them in order to humble them, and to bring them to a sense of their sins, and an acknowledgement of them.” Adversities do not come upon us at haphazard, but from the hand of God; nor does He appoint them arbitrarily, but righteously. God will no more wink at the sins of His people than He will at those of the worldlings: were He to do so, He would not maintain the honour of his house. As Thomas Manton (1620-1677) also pointed out on Jeremiah 5:25, “If there be any restraint of God's blessing, it is because of man's sin.”

“The way of transgressors is hard” (Pro 13:15): while no doubt the primary reference there is unto the wicked, yet the principle expressed applies unmistakably to the redeemed as well. If, on the one hand, in keeping God's commandments there is “great reward,” on the other hand, the breaking of them involves great loss. If it be true that Wisdom's “ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace” (Pro 3:17), certain it is that if we turn from her ways, we shall be made to smart for it. Alas, how often we stand in our own light and choke the current of God's favours. It is not only an “evil thing,” but a “bitter” one to forsake the “LORD [our] God” (Jer 2:19). That is why sin is so often termed “folly,” for it is not only a crime against God, but madness toward ourselves. Many are the mischiefs caused by our sinning, the chief of which is that we obstruct the flow of God's blessings. Sin costs us dear, for it not only immediately takes from us, but it prevents our future receiving of divine bounties. In other words, willful sinning prevents our receiving God's best for us.

“Believe in the LORD your God, *so* shall ye be established; believe his prophets, *so* shall ye prosper” (2Ch 20:20) states the principle clearly enough. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and your souls shall be settled in peace and joy; receive with submission every discovery of His will through His Word and servants, and His providential smile shall be your portion. But, conversely, lean unto your own understanding and suffer unbelief to prevail, and assurance and tranquility of soul will wane and vanish; let self-will and self-pleasing dominate, and His providences will frown upon you. The connection between conduct and its consequences cannot be broken. Walk in the way of faith and holiness and God is pleased, and will evidence His pleasure toward us; enter the paths of unrighteousness and God is provoked, and will visit His displeasure upon us. When Israel's land was laid waste and their cities were burned, they were told, “Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, when he led thee by the way?” (Jer 2:17). Upon which Matthew Henry (1662-1714) said, “Whatever trouble we are in at any time, we may thank ourselves for it, for we bring it upon our own hands by our forsaking of God.” “The curse causeless shall not come” (Pro 26:2).

Missing God's best is true of the *unsaved*. As long as unbelievers are left in this world, opportunity is given them of escaping from the wrath to come. Therefore they are exhorted—in the Scriptures, if not from the pulpit—“Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near” (Isa 55:6). For the same reason, there is a *door* represented as being *open* to them, which the Master of the house will one day rise up and shut to (Luk 13:24-25). Nothing could more clearly express the danger of delay than the language used in such passages. Nor is there anything in them which at all clashes with the divine decrees. As one has pointed out, “All allow that men have opportunity in *natural* things to do what they do not, and to obtain what they obtain not; and if that be consistent with a universal providence which performeth all things that are appointed for us (Job 23:14), why cannot the other consist with the purpose of Him who does nothing without a plan, but ‘worketh all things after the counsel of his own will’ (Eph 1:11).”

Slothfulness is no excuse in those who refuse to improve their lot; nor is intemperance any extenuation for a man's bringing upon himself physical, financial, and moral disaster. Still less does either prejudice or indolence release any from his accountability to accept the free offer of the Gospel. “Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?” (Pro 17:16). The “price in the

hand” signifies the means and opportunity. “Wisdom” may be understood both naturally and spiritually. The “fool” is the one who fails to obtain what he might well and should procure. The reason he does not is simply that he lacks “a heart” or desire and determination. As M. Henry said, “He has set his heart upon other things, so that he has no heart to do his duty, or to the great concerns of this soul.” Such fools the world is full of: they prefer sin to holiness, this world rather than heaven. “He who in his bargains exchanges precious things for trifles is a fool. Thus do men sell their time which is their money given for eternity, and they sell it for things unsatisfying, they sell themselves for naught”—Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680); and thereby they miss God’s best.

“Wherefore is there a price in the hand of a fool to get wisdom, seeing he hath no heart to it?” (Pro 17:16). After interpreting those words first as natural wisdom and knowledge, and “the price” as the worldly substance which a foolish man spends on riotous living, instead of purchasing useful books for the improvement of his mind, none other than John Gill said upon its higher application: “Spiritual wisdom and knowledge: the means of which are reading the Word, frequent opportunities for attending on a Gospel ministry...conversation with Gospel ministers and other Christians; but instead of making use of these, he neglects, slights, and despises them. And it is asked, with some degree of indignation and astonishment, why or to what purpose a fool is favoured with such means? *seeing* he hath no heart to it? To wisdom: he does not desire it, nor to make use of the price or means in order to obtain it; all is lost upon him, and it is hard to account for why he should have this price when he makes such an ill use of it.” But J. Gill created his own difficulty: God provides the non-elect with spiritual means and opportunities to enforce their responsibility, so that their blood shall be upon their own heads, that the blame is *theirs* for missing His best.

But it is the Christian’s doing so that we have chiefly in mind. Sad indeed is it to behold so many of them living more under the frown of God than His smile; and sadder still that so few of them have been taught *why* it is so with them, and *how* to recover themselves. The New Testament makes it clear that many of the primitive saints “ran well” for a time, and then something hindered them. Observation shows that the majority of believers “follow [the Lord] fully” (Num 14:24) at the *outset*, but soon leave their “first love” (Rev 2:4). At the beginning, they respond readily to the promptings of the Spirit and adjust their lives to the requirements of the Word—until some demand is made upon them, some self-denying duty is met with, and they balk. Then the Holy Spirit is grieved, His enabling power is withheld, their peace and joy wane, and a spiritual decline sets in. Unless they put right with God what is wrong—repent of and contritely confess their sad failure—the rod of chastisement falls upon them; but instead of being “exercised thereby” (Heb 12:11) some fatalistically accept it as “their appointed lot,” and are nothing bettered thereby.

Now the Lord has plainly warned His people that if they meet not His just requirements, so far from enjoying His best, adversity will be their portion. “Take good heed therefore unto yourselves, that ye love the LORD your God. *Else* if ye do in any wise go back, and cleave unto the remnant of these nations, even these that remain among you, and shall make marriages with them, and go in unto them, and they to you: Know for a certainty that the LORD your God will no more drive out any of these nations from before you; but they shall be snares and traps unto you, and scourges in your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until ye perish from off this good land which the LORD your God hath given you” (Jos 23:11-13). The Jews held Canaan by the tenure of their obedience, and so do those who belong to “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16) now possess and enjoy their spiritual Canaan in proportion to their obedience. But as God has forewarned, “If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail” (Psa 89:30-33).

That passage makes it unmistakably clear that while the chastenings from our Father proceed from both His faithfulness and holy love, yet they are also marks of His displeasure; and that while they are designed for our good—the recovery of us from our backsliding—yet they have been provoked by our own waywardness. The Father’s rod is not wielded by an arbitrary sovereignty, but by righteousness. It is expressly declared, “For he *doth not afflict willingly* nor grieve the children of men” (Lam 3:33), but only as we give Him occasion to do so. That important statement has not received the attention it deserves, especially by those who have so focused their thoughts upon God’s eternal decrees as to quite lose sight of his governmental ways. Hence the tragic thing is that when chastisement becomes *their* portion, they know of nothing better than to “bow to God’s sovereign will,” which is very little different in principle from the world’s policy of “seeking to make the best of a bad job,” or “we must grit our teeth and endure it.” Such a

fatalistic and supine attitude ill becomes a regenerate soul; instead, he is required to be “exercised thereby” (Heb 12:11).

Only too often such “bowing to the will of God” is so far from being a mark of spirituality; it rather evinces a sluggish conscience. God bids His people, “*Hear ye the rod*” (Mic 6:9). It has a message for the heart, but we profit nothing unless we ascertain what the rod is saying to us—why it is that God is now smiting us! In order to discover its message, we need to humbly ask the Lord, “*Shew me wherefore thou contendest with me*” (Job 10:2); “cause me to understand wherein I have erred” (Job 6:24); reveal to me wherein I have displeased Thee, that I may contritely acknowledge my offence and be more on my guard against a repetition of it. The holiness of God will not tolerate sin in the saints, and when they go on in the same unrepentingly, then He declares, “Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns” (Hos 2:6). Note well “*thy way*”—not “*my way*.” God sets the briars of trials and the sharp thorns of afflictions in the path of His disobedient children. If that suffices not to bring them to their senses, then he adds, “And make a wall, that she shall not find her paths” (Hos 2:6)—His providences block the realization of their carnal and covetous desires.

“But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: and they walked in their own counsels. Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! I *should* soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries...He *should* have fed them also with the finest of the wheat: and with honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee” (Psa 81:11-16). When we meet with a passage like this, our first duty is to receive it with meekness, and not to inquire, How is it to be harmonized with the invincibility of the divine decrees? Our second duty is to prayerfully endeavour to understand its sense, and not to explain away its terms. We must not draw inferences from it which contradict other declarations of Holy Writ—either concerning the accomplishment of God’s purpose or His dealing with us according to our conduct. Instead of reasoning about their teaching, we need to turn these verses into earnest petition begging God to preserve us from such sinful folly as marked Israel on this occasion.

There is nothing in those verses which should occasion any difficulty for the Calvinist, for they treat not of the eternal foreordinations of God, but of His governmental ways with men in this life. For the same reason, there is nothing in them which in any wise supports the Arminian delusion that, having created men free moral agents, God is unable to do for them and with them what He desires without reducing them to mere machines. We should, then, proceed on that which is obvious in them, and not confuse ourselves by reading into them anything obscure. The key to them is found in verses 11-12: Israel walked contrary to God’s will—not His decretive, but His preceptive. They acted not according to the divine commandments, but in their self-will and self-pleasing, determined to have their own way; and in consequence, they forfeited God’s best for them. Instead of His subduing their enemies, He allowed the heathen to vanquish them. Instead of providing abundant harvests, He sent them famines (2Sa 21:1). Instead of giving them pastors after His own heart, He suffered them to be deceived by false prophets (compare 2Th 2:10-11).

“O that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea” (Isa 48:18). On which even J. Gill said, “Their prosperity, temporal and spiritual, had been abundant, and would always have continued, have been increasing and everflowing.” Failure to walk in the paths of God’s precepts deprives us of many a blessing. In his review of *The Life and Letters of the Late James Bourne* (*Gospel Standard*, October 1861), Joseph Charles Philpot (1802-1869) said, “There is deep truth in the following extract”—a sentence or two of which we here quote: “If I pay no reverence to such a word as this, ‘Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good’ (Rom 12:21), I shall fall into bondage, and find my prayer shut out. It will prove a hindrance to my approaches to God, for ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me’ (Psa 66:18)...If you attend not to the word of *exhortation*, you will find no end of misery, and the sensible lack of the Lord’s presence; you will have no communion with His people, no blessing of God upon the work of your hands.”

After describing the sore judgments of God which were about to fall upon the wayward children of Israel, His faithful servant told them plainly, “Thy way and thy doings have procured these things unto thee; this is thy wickedness, because it is bitter, because it reacheth unto thine heart” (Jer 4:18). Upon which J. Gill said, “Those calamities coming upon them, they had none to blame but themselves; it was their *own* sinful ways and works whereby that this ruin and destruction came on them.” Consider also this passage: “Ye looked for much, and, lo, it came to little; and when ye brought it home, I did blow upon it. *Why?* saith the LORD of hosts” (Hag 1:9). This searching question was put for their sakes, “that they might

be made sensible of it, and in order to introduce what follows: ‘Because of mine house that is waste’—which they suffered to lie waste, and did not concern themselves about the rebuilding of it; this the Lord resented, and for this reason blasted all their labours; and ‘ye run every man unto his own house’”—J. Gill. How many a Christian today might trace God’s “blowing upon” *his* temporal affairs unto his putting his carnal interests before the Lord’s!

Consider now some individual examples. Do not the closing incidents recorded in the life of Lot make plain demonstration that *he* “missed God’s best”? Witness his being forcibly conducted out of Sodom by the angels, where all his earthly possessions, his sons, and his sons-in-law perished; and when his wife was turned into a pillar of salt for her defiance. Behold his intemperance in the cave, then unwittingly committing incest with his own daughters—the last thing chronicled of him! But “[was] there not a cause”? Go back and mark him separating from godly Abraham, coveting the plain of Jordan, “[pitching] his tent toward Sodom” (Gen 13:12). Though “the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly” (Gen 13:13), yet Lot settled in their midst, and even “sat in the gate of Sodom” (Gen 19:1)—i.e. held office there! Is it not equally evident that *Jacob* too missed God’s best? Hear his own sad confession near the close of his career: “Few and evil have the days of the years of my life been” (Gen 47:9). And is the explanation far to seek? Read his history, and it should at once be apparent that he was made to reap exactly as he had sown.

The chequered life of David supplies us with more than one or two illustrations of the same principle. Few men have experienced such sore social and domestic trials as he did. Not only was David caused much trouble by political traitors in his kingdom, but, what was far more painful, the members of his own family brought down heavy sorrows upon him. The second book of Samuel records one calamity after another. His favourite wife turned against him (2Sam 6:20-22), his daughter Tamar was raped by her half-brother (2Sam 13:14), and his son Amnon was murdered (2Sam 13:28-29). His favourite son, Absalom, sought to wrest the kingdom from him, and then met with an ignominious end (2Sam 18:14). Before David’s death, yet another of his sons sought to obtain the throne (1Ki 1:5), and he too was murdered (1Ki 2:24-25). Since the Lord afflicts not willingly, but only as our sins give occasion, it behoves us to attend closely to what led up to and brought upon David those great afflictions. Nor have we far to seek. Read 2 Samuel 3:2-5, and note his *six wives*: he gave way to the lusts of the flesh, and of the flesh he “[reaped] corruption” (Gal 6:8)!

Painful though it be for us to dwell upon the failings and falls of the sweet Psalmist of Israel, especially since in so many respects, he puts both writer and reader to shame; yet it must be remembered that “for whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for *our learning*” (Rom 15:4)—that we might heed such warnings, and be preserved from similar backslidings. His grievous offence against Uriah and Bathsheba is prefaced by the fact that he was indulging in slothful ease, instead of performing his duty (2Sa 11:1-2)—observe well the ominous “But” at the close of verse 1! Though David sincerely and bitterly repented of those sins and obtained the Lord’s forgiveness, yet by them he missed His best; and for the rest of his days, lived under more or less *adverse* providences, and the “sword” never departed from his house (2Sa 12:10). Nothing could more plainly evince that a holy God takes notice of our actions and deals with us accordingly, or make it manifest that it is our own folly which brings down the rod of God upon us. We read the historical portions of Scripture to little purpose or profit, unless their practical lessons are taken to heart by us. Our consciences require to be searched by these narratives far more than our minds to be informed by them!

THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

15. *The Holy Bible, Part 7*

7. *Its uniqueness.* Viewed simply as a book, the Bible stands far apart from all others. Amid the writings of the ancients or the productions of our moderns, there is nothing which, for a moment, bears comparison with it. The Bible not only occupies a prominent place in literature, but an unrivalled one. Consider its amazing *circulation*. The number of its editions is to be counted not by the dozen or even the hundred, but literally by the thousand. And not merely tens or hundreds of thousands of copies have been printed, but hundreds of millions! That at once separates it by an immeasurable distance from everything penned by man. Consider its unequalled *translation*. It has been rendered into all the multitudinous dialects of the earth. Those of every nation now have the Bible in their own tongue. It has been printed in more than six hundred languages! That too is without any parallel. The most famous and popular compositions of men have not been translated into one tenth as many tongues. Consider its *by-products*: countless works have been devoted to its exposition, millions of sermons preached and published on portions of it. That also is without any precedent.

Consider further the laborious *indexes* which have been made upon its contents. There are voluminous concordances which not only list every word used in the Scriptures, but all the occurrences of them—in many cases, scores, and in not a few, hundreds, of references. Now, we do not possess complete concordances of any of the writings of the most renowned human author, wherein is collated every occurrence of each word he used. And why? Because no such nicety, no such significance, pertains to *his* language as makes the sense of a passage or the force of an argument turn upon a single word. Much less has the ablest of human authors employed all his terms with exact consistency and correspondence throughout the whole of his writings. Yet such *is* the case with the Bible—wherein no less than forty different men were used as its scribes! The *Concordance* loudly proclaims the uniqueness of the Bible. It tacitly declares that not simply this or that term, but every word from Genesis to Revelation is God-breathed, and that every occurrence of each word was directed by His unerring wisdom.

The *perpetuity of their text* is unique. The Sacred Scriptures were written originally in Hebrew and Greek, which are the only languages that, dating back of all tradition, are still recognized as living vehicles of thought. The language spoken in the streets of modern Athens is identically the same, to its very accents, as that used by Plato and Socrates, yea, of Homer's *Iliad*, which was composed almost three thousand years ago. In like manner, the Hebrew of the Talmud is the Hebrew of the book of Genesis. What a remarkable survival, or rather a miracle, of divine power! That becomes more apparent when we contrast how other ancient tongues have long since passed away. The Egyptian of the builders of the pyramids has perished. The Syrian used by Rabshakeh is no more. The dialect spoken by the original Britons is now unknown. Yet the Hebrew employed by Moses is spoken by the Jewish rabbis today, and the Greek used by the apostle Paul is heard in Salonica at this hour. Here then is a striking and unparalleled fact: that the languages in which God wrote His Word have outlived all their contemporaries and have remained unchanged throughout the centuries!

Even on its surface, the Bible differs from all other books. That appears in the *style* of its writings. Two languages were used which are quite diverse in their manner of inscription. The Hebrew is written and read from right to left, whereas the Greek (and all modern languages) is written and read from left to right. The Scriptures make no comment upon that arresting and striking contrast, but leave the reader to interpret the fact in the light of their contents. Once attention be focused upon the same, its significance is at once apparent: in the singular reversal of its text, the Bible teaches us the two most fundamental and radical facts in human history: man's apostasy from God, and his restoration. The "right hand" is that of dignity and privilege (Psa 110:1), the "left hand" is that of disgrace and condemnation (Mat 25:41). The Old Testament, written in Hebrew, is an amplification of that statement, "Man being in honour abideth not" (Psa 49:12), being a record of his departure from God, with all its evil consequences. The New Testament, written in Greek, has for its leading theme how the wanderer is restored to God, how the prodigal returns to the Father's house.

As another has pointed out, the uniqueness of the Bible appears (again) in that its conjugation of the Hebrew verb puts man in his proper place. "In all Occidental languages, the verb is conjugated from the first person to the third—'I,' 'Thou,' 'He.' The Hebrew, in reversal of the human thought, is conjugated

from the third down and backward to the first: beginning with God, then my neighbour, then myself last—‘He,’ ‘Thou,’ ‘I.’ This is the divine order: self-obliterating and beautiful. That peculiarity is very much more than an interesting detail in philology: it embodies and expresses a profound spiritual truth. It accords God His due pre-eminency, and thereby teaches us that all right thinking must start with *Him* and work downward to man. For that very reason, the Scriptures open with the words, “In the beginning *God*” (Gen 1:1). No theology can be sound unless it makes that truth its foundation and starting point. The initiative is ever with God: “We love him, because he first loved us” (1Jo 4:19). Once God be accorded His rightful place in our affections, man is automatically put where he belongs—but which, apart from divine revelation and divine grace, he never takes!

8. *Its delineation of God.* The portrayal of Deity supplied by the Bible is so very different from and so vastly superior to that furnished by all other sources, we are forced to conclude it cannot be of human invention. Beginning with the Old Testament, let us single out two statements which were penned by Moses. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is *one* LORD” (Deu 6:4). That is a startling, yea, a unique declaration, at complete variance with the conceptions of all his contemporaries. Polytheism—or a belief in and worship of a plurality of gods—prevailed universally among the heathen. Whence then did Moses obtain his knowledge of the true God, who is one in His essence? Certainly not from the Egyptians, for their king confessed, “I know not the LORD” (Exo 5:2). “The LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty”—who continue impenitent and despise an atoning sacrifice (Exo 34:6-7). Such a conception of the divine perfections is as far beyond the reach of man’s mind as heaven is above the earth. Search the philosophers, the mystics, and religious teachers of the ancients, and nothing can be found which in the least resembles such a blessed conception of God as that.

“For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit” (Isa 57:15). “Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath *mine* hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is *poor* and of a contrite spirit” (Isa 66:1-2). The majesty of such language at once distinguishes it from all human compositions and evinces it was not fabricated by the brain of man. But suppose for the sake of argument that the mind of man *had* soared to such an elevated conception of Deity as is portrayed in the first part of those passages, it had certainly not conceived of what follows in the second part. Therein God is presented not only in the greatness of His infinite excellency above all creatures, but also in His amazing condescension unto the meanest of men. Those verses not only exhibit the transcendency of the Creator, but make known the marvels of His *grace*, which He accounts “the praise of [His] glory” (Eph 1:6).

Turning to the New Testament, we will confine ourselves to three brief statements: “God is a Spirit” (Joh 4:24), “God is light” (1Jo 1:5), “God is love” (1Jo 4:8). Those three descriptions of Deity furnish us with a truer and more elevated view of Him than could the most elaborate definitions of human eloquence and genius. They announce the spirituality, the purity, and the benevolence of God. The first purports to be a record of words spoken by Christ during His earthly ministry; the second and third to be inspired declarations given by the Holy Spirit through a human instrument. If their divine origin be denied, then the sceptic is faced with this problem: all three were penned by an unlettered fisherman! Whence did he derive such conceptions?—conceptions before which philosophy is abashed. The sublimity and the comprehensiveness of those brief expressions are without any peer, or even parallel. If they originated from one unlearned, it would be a much greater marvel and miracle than that he wrote them under divine dictation. Much more might be added by entering into a detailed enumeration of all the wondrous attributes of God, but sufficient has been pointed out to establish how immeasurably grander is the Bible’s delineation of God than anything found in the writings of men.

9. *Its representation of man.* The account which the Bible gives of man is radically different from that supplied by all human compositions. That sin and misery exist, yea, abound in the world, is a patent fact, however unpleasant it may be. The daily newspapers report it, the police courts illustrate it, the prisons witness thereto. Nor is this fearful moral disease confined to any one nation, or even limited to any particular strata of society, but is common to all. It is no new epidemic, for it has prevailed in all periods of history. Every human attempt to banish or even curb it has failed. Legislation, education, increased wages, and improved environments have produced no change for the better. Sin is too deeply rooted and widely spread in

human nature for the remedial efforts of social reformers to extirpate it. The wisest men who reject the divine explanation of this tragic mystery are completely in the dark as to the real nature and origin of the malady. The Bible is the only book in existence which truly describes the sinful condition of man, accurately diagnoses his case, and ascribes it to an adequate cause. It teaches that as a result of his defection from God at the beginning of human history, he is a fallen, ruined, guilty, lost creature.

The picture which the Scripture gives of man is a deeply humiliating one, radically different from all drawn by human pencils. It is so because human writers describe how man views himself and how he appears in the eyes of his fellows; the Bible alone informs us what man is in the sight of *God*! His unerring Word affirms, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom 3:10)—not a single member of our race who is conformed to the divine Rule. That Word solemnly asserts, "There is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Rom 3:12) according to the divine Standard of conduct: not one in his natural condition whose actions proceed from a holy principle, acts out of love to God, or with an eye single to His glory. Such statements as those are much too unpalatable to proud human nature to have been made by any who sought to palm off an alleged communication from heaven designed for universal acceptance. The Bible also shows *why* we cannot meet the just requirements of our Maker: each of us is "shapen in iniquity" and conceived in sin (Psa 51:5). Depravity is transmitted from parent to child: each one enters this world with a defiled nature, with a bent toward evil.

Since the foundation be polluted, all the streams issuing therefrom are foul. Fallen Adam "begat a son in his own [moral] likeness, after his [sinful] image" (Gen 5:3); and thus, it has been with each succeeding generation. "Man be born like a wild ass's colt" (Job 11:12)—thoroughly intractable, hating restraint, wanting to have his own way. Think you, my reader, such a description of human nature as that was invented by man? "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Psa 58:3). Entering this world "alienated from the life of God" (Eph 4:18), that which is bred in the bone quickly comes out in the flesh. No child requires to be taught to tell lies—it is natural for him to do so, and the more he be left free to "develop his own personality" without "inhibitions," the more will his delinquency appear. "Every man at his best state is altogether vanity" (Psa 39:5)—an empty bubble, yea, as vain as a peacock. He is as unsubstantial as the wind. "Men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity" (Psa 62:9). Man, who so glories in himself, had never originated such an estimate of himself.

Instead of making Satan the author of all our iniquities, the Holy bible teaches, "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness...All these evil things come *from within*, and defile the man" (Mar 7:21-23). External temptations would have no power unless there were something within us to which they could appeal: a lighted match is a menace to a barrel of gun powder, but not so to one filled with water! That explains why all the efforts of statesmen, educators, social reformers, are unavailing to effect any improvement of man: they are incapable of reaching the seat of his moral disease; at most, they can but place outward restraints on him. It is vain to move the hands of a watch or polish its case if the mainspring be broken. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9) is another concept which had never originated in the human mind, for it is quite contrary to our ideas and too abasing for our acceptance. Such a pride-withering delineation of human nature as the Bible furnishes could have been supplied by none other than God Himself.

The Bible not only paints human nature in the colours of truth and reality, but it also reveals how it has come to be what it now is. The existence of moral evil has been acknowledged in every age, for it was far too palpable and potent to be denied; but whence it came and how it originated proved to be a problem, which the wisest, without divine revelation, were unable to solve. To ascribe it to the malignity of matter (as some of the ancients did) is a manifest absurdity, for matter possesses no moral qualities, and could not corrupt the heart and mind, however closely it were placed in connection with them. The Scriptures inform us that "Man being in honour abideth not" (Psa 49:12). The Hebrew word for "man" there is *Adam*; and that verse informs us that the father of our race continued not in the state of purity in which God created him. He disobeyed his Maker, lost his innocence by his own fault, and having corrupted himself, has communicated his depravity unto all his descendants. "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). The root was vitiated, and therefore, every part of the tree springing from it is tainted.

10. *Its teaching on sin.* As might well be expected, the teaching of Holy Writ thereon is as different from that of fallen man's, as is light from darkness. So long as it breaks not forth in open crime, to the injury of their own interests, those of this world regard sin lightly and minimize its seriousness. In many quarters, sin is regarded as being merely a species of ignorance, and the sinner is looked upon as more to be pitied than blamed. The various terms which are commonly used as substitutes for sin indicate how inadequate and low is the popular conception: infirmities, mistakes, shortcomings, and youthful follies, they speak of—rather than iniquities, transgressions, disobedience, and wickedness. In the Bible, sin is never palliated or extenuated, but from first to last, its heinousness and enormity are insisted upon. The Word of truth declares that “sin is very grievous” (Gen 18:20), that “abominable thing that [the Lord] hate” (Jer 44:4). It regards sin as being “red like crimson” (Isa 1:18) and declares it to be “exceeding sinful” (Rom 7:13). It likens sin to “the poison of asps” (Rom 3:13), to the “scum” of a seething-pot, to the loathsome disease of leprosy.

The Bible declares, “the *thought* of foolishness is sin” (Pro 24:9)—what human mind devised such a standard as that! It teaches that “whatsoever is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23), so that unbelief and doubting are reprobated. It insists that “to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jam 4:17), so that sins of omission—equally with those of commission—are condemned; yea, sins of *ignorance* are culpable (Lev 5:17), for with God's Word in our hands, ignorance is inexcusable. Holy Writ teaches that sin is more than an act, namely, an attitude which precedes and produces the action. “Sin is lawlessness” (1Jo 3:4, R.V.), spiritual anarchy, and a state of rebellion against the Lawgiver Himself. It insists that we are sinners by nature before we are sinners by practice. It does not restrict its indictments to any particular class, but declares that “*all* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Now a book which uniformly depicts sin as a vile and hideous thing which strips man of every excuse, which avers that “every imagination of the thoughts of [man's] heart [is] only evil continually” (Gen 6:5), and which brings in “all the world...guilty before God” (Rom 3:19), could not have been created by fallen creatures, but must have come from the thrice Holy One.

The same applies with equal force to the teaching of the Scriptures concerning *the punishment of sin*. A defective view of sin necessarily leads to an inadequate conception of what is due unto it. Man looks at sin and its deserts solely from the human viewpoint, but the Bible exhibits its malignity in the light of God's broken Law, and shows it to be one of infinite enormity and guilt, which—where the atoning sacrifice of Christ be rejected—demands and receives eternal punishment. The Word of truth reveals that all who die in their sins will be consciously tormented for ever and ever in “hell fire” (Mat 18:9), and there will not be a drop of water to relieve the sufferer. The sphere of their anguish is described as “the blackness of darkness for ever” (Jude 1:13)—for not a ray of hope ever enters there—and where there is “wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mat 13:42). None but the Holy One, who alone is capable of determining what is due to rebels against Himself, could have lifted the veil and given us a glimpse of the terrible character of sin's wages. The fact that this solemn truth is so distasteful to all and so widely rejected—and yet occupies a place of so much prominence in the Bible—is one of the many proofs that it is not of human origin.

