

Bible Study

Eager minds have laboured lovingly and long in the study of the Bible. Who would seek to discourage anyone from such enquiry? Yet when we see below the surface, and realise that there is a definite difference between a study of the Bible and the study of the Scriptures, we long to point out the way more excellent. Bible students are not sufficiently concerned to throw off preconceived notions arising from the environment in which they have been nurtured; they have been to men's schools, and they continue to go there, even though they may be seeking to give more earnest attention to God's Word.

QUALIFIED STUDY

In general, very few even realise that the Scriptures require qualified workers to handle them. They must be correctly partitioned if we are to get the truth. This cannot be done unless we definitely seek to know how God partitions His ways in His dealings with the universe, as He operates to bring it to His ultimate. If we think, when God mentions pardon in certain connections, this is the same as justification, then we cannot hope to reach any semblance of the correct partitioning which is necessary before we can apprehend the truth of the Scriptures. So also, if we take the evangel heralded by the Lord before His death upon the cross to be the same as that given to the apostle Paul, which is distinctly founded upon His death, there can be little expectation of our getting the truth.

BIBLE DIVISIONS INCORRECT

In connection with this question of correctly partitioning the word of truth, we should remark that the Bible has assumed a form which clouds our view; it comes to us divided into two sections, termed the Old and New Testaments. This ready-made division misdirects study in the initial stage. It is not easily seen that the ministries recorded in the four so-called "gospels" are addressed to the descendants of the same people as those addressed in the Old Testament; that they are announcing matters which are the outcome of what was previously revealed, that the situation developed in the history of the Kings and the Prophets is to be rectified by the One Who does His heralding in the cities of Israel, calling them to repentance. Nor does the subject change in Acts, except that it adds one more crime to the catalogue; that book continues the beginning made by Israel's Messiah. But the activities of the Twelve are gradually removed from Jerusalem, and eventually recede into the background. The circle of the Twelve is broken by Herod.

GOD'S DIVISION CORRECT

It is at this juncture that God introduces a radical change; from the prophets and teachers at Antioch God *severs* Saul and Barnabas. This is God's initial move to turn away from the ways which were dominated by His promises to Israel. God is turning to the nations to whom He sends an evangel based, not on the *life* of Christ, but on His *death* and *resurrection*. In doing so, God is reverting to conditions anterior to the introduction of circumcision; He goes back to Abraham in uncircumcision to find correspondences for what He is revealing through Paul. A clear and full view will throw into bold relief the epistles arising through this one named Saul, but now called Paul. We shall see that the partitioning must not be between Malachi and Matthew, as is done in the Bible, but rather at the end of Acts, when God distinctly announces that the evangel is now sent to the nations. The group of writings to which Paul's name is attached is God's great division in the Scriptures for the present economy in which Israel is cast aside. The remaining books of the so-called New Testament are the links leading to the book of Revelation, which introduces the day of the Lord, spoken of so much by the prophets of old. That unveiling brings to fulfillment the ministry of the Lord and the Twelve.

An intelligent survey looks at the Scriptures as a whole, noting God's divisions into books rather than the verses of our Bible. It notes to whom God addresses His message at each particular point in the course of revelation. It seeks to discover the scope of each book, and then places it in the proper category. It does not look for verses which seem to agree with notions previously conceived without qualified investigation of the Scriptures.

A PATTERN OF SOUND WORDS

We should realise that the prime necessity, if we desire a thorough understanding of the Scriptures, is to remove from our minds the question that any of our ideas are beyond question. It is also required that we have a pattern of sound words, and this demands that we query all translations of the Scriptures which have not been based on a system which gives the soundness and regular usage of words.

The realisation of this requirement is perhaps the greatest advance that can accrue to our outlook on the task before us. It will make us alert to the vital value of the scriptural words, and should cause us to see that we require no contexts conceived from outside sources. And, together with an understanding of the question of correct partitioning, we ought readily to realise that contexts are all-important, and must not be ignored.

CONTEXTS AND VERSES

Few of the saints have tried sufficiently to free themselves from the baneful habit of fixing upon a verse which seems to agree with a conclusion they desire to prove as truth. We should strive to realise that our study is still controlled, in some degree at least, by such influence. We need constantly to pray for the wise and revealing spirit to enlighten the eyes of our heart, and rid us of the context of our misconceptions. The following may serve as a concrete example.

MY FATHER'S HOUSE

We read that, "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2). Here we have a verse which is usually divorced from its setting. Generations of expositors of the Bible have been under the misconception that in this utterance of our Lord He was referring to *heaven* and that the words indicated blessings to be enjoyed therein. Such an idea is but an assumption, for it has no agreement with the scope of the Master's teaching. It would require much more than an isolated text, spoken in the last hours of His ministry, to establish such a conclusion; for there is not the least doubt that He came heralding the kingdom of God promised to Israel through the Hebrew prophets. All of His pronouncements were in accord therewith, and He never went outside the scope of the promises already made, which were to find their fulfilment on the earth and within the land defined in the records of God's dealings and ways with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their descendants.

PAUL'S MINISTRY UNIQUE

The inference, here examined, is sometimes used in an effort to show that Paul's ministry was not exclusive in announcing blessings in heaven, and that hence Paul's teachings are but an elaboration of His Master's words. Those saints whose minds and faith have penetrated into the details of Paul's ministry can never be persuaded by such arguments, for they have seen God's ways with Paul; they have perceived how unique is the evangel given to him, and how it differs diametrically from that of the apostles. Moreover they have learned that the two ministries differ, not only in fact, but because the basis of the evangel heralded by the Lord, and continued by the twelve, requires Israel to be *established* on earth, whereas Paul's ministry calls for Israel's *defection*. The object of the two evangels is radically different. Yet each contributes to God's ultimate for the universe.

HEAVEN NOT PROMISED BY CHRIST

Those saints whose minds have been able to rise above the methods usual to Bible study see very clearly, not only the falseness of the proposition, but also that it ignores the immediate context of the verse, and the larger context of John's gospel. The latter definitely prohibits the thought of any heavenly destiny for the sons of Israel. This chapter of John's account says nothing of heaven; in fact, the word does not even occur in the conversation between Christ and His disciples, yet teachers from their own traditions inject it into the discourse, and seem unwilling to let the context colour the verse. A realisation of this will show us that the latter is in fullest agreement with the scope of the whole book. The word heaven occurs nineteen times, and in every instance except one it refers to details concerning the Lord Jesus Himself, but never once is the word used to indicate blessing in heaven. The one exception tells us that no man has ascended into heaven (John 3:13).

HEAVEN NOT A HOUSE

The Master's use of the words "My Father's House" could not possibly give the disciples the impression that He was speaking of heaven. To them God's house was the temple on Moriah. In this gospel it is recorded that Christ, when going into this sanctuary, and finding it being used for the purpose of selling oxen, etc. and the changing of money, referred to it as "My Father's House". It is in this house that the Master promises to make ready a place for the disciples. And in the course of the discussion the method by which this was possible is introduced. The disciples did not understand that Christ's departure from them was to be by means of His crucifixion. Nor did they apprehend the necessity for His death, and what it would accomplish. Christ is telling them that His death was to make ready for them a place in His Father's house, to which they could lay no claim on other grounds.

The picture presented to the minds of the disciples by the Father's house with abodes, not "mansions", becomes the basis of a revelation that the Father and the Son will also, because of the Son's departure from them, make their abode in the *disciples*. We ought to take notice that the conversation starts in chapter thirteen and proceeds through chapters fourteen, fifteen and sixteen, culminating with Christ's prayer to His father in chapter seventeen. Thus the matter begins with the Passover meal and is ended by the scenes in Gethsemane. The great thought controlling the whole is the mutual abiding in each other of the Father, Son and disciples, as well as others who keep the words and precepts of Christ.

The Lord's departure is announced in chapter thirteen (verse 33), and chapter fourteen continues the discussion which arose out of this intimation. Christ seeks to relieve the distress which will follow His departure, and in the course of His words He presses upon them their unity, showing how He and the Father are one, abiding in each other, and how the same should be true of the disciples.

FAITH IN GOD AND IN CHRIST

Faith is the keynote with which to dispel their distress: faith in God and Faith also in Christ. His going from them, and its mode, will be proof that He is "the Way, the Truth and the Life". The whole discourse is at the end of the Lord's ministry, yet they do not seem to grasp that Christ is the *Lamb* of God; they have little understanding that He was to *suffer*. The point is being pressed upon them, and in view of the mode of His departure, they are urged to be believing into God and into Christ. The ignominious death will not prove Him to have been a deceiver.

The Master's going away was a necessity. A place was to be made ready for the disciples in the Father's house, and this could only be by His leaving them through His death. This would prepare their place in the Father's house, both literally and in figure, and He would come again and take them to Himself. Meanwhile, and until He comes, the Father and the Son will remain or abide in the disciples.

THE LAMB OF GOD NOT UNDERSTOOD

The reason for all this emphasis concerning Christ's departure, whilst still abiding in spirit, may become more apparent to us when we perceive that the account of John presents the *priestly* aspect of the ministry of Him Who is the Word. He is not presented as the King, or the Prophet, though He is both of these. Lo! The *Lamb* of God! This is the arousing announcement of John. Priests and Levites had come to enquire why He baptised. Though priests, they are ignorant concerning God's ways with Christ as the Sacrifice. They would accept Christ on the *throne*, but not on the *altar*. This mistake, perhaps in a lesser degree, is found even in the minds of the disciples. They are still far from appreciating that their Master must *suffer* before entering into His glory. Though Judas had made his exit, to carry out his betrayal of the Master, yet their minds are slow to understand. They do not realise the reason for His going away from them, much less the method of His going.

GOD ABIDING WITH HIS PEOPLE

The discourse develops a series of figures, interwoven in a manner which shows the reason for Christ's departure, and at the same time what is to be accomplished thereby. The way to the Father was to be revealed. Thomas took this literally, but the Lord explains that He Himself is the Way to the Father, and no one is coming to the Father except through Him. To this the Master adds the seeming enigma: you know the Father and have seen Him. Thereupon Philip requests to be shown the Father. He also failed to perceive the significance of the

Master's words, for the explanation shows that the Father is seen in the Son, from which emerges the fact that the Son is the abode of the Father - the Father is remaining in Him.

The teaching is carried still further. Another consoler is to be given, the spirit of truth; it will remain beside and in them. Then will they know that He is in the Father, the disciples are in Him, and He is in them. The one who keeps His precepts, he is the one who is loving the Master, and to such He will be disclosing Himself. Judas now ventures to enquire why He does not disclose Himself to the world. The answer gives us a key to the reference to the *abodes* in God's house; the Father and the Son will be making an abode with the one who keeps the word of Christ. Thus, from the introduction of the Father's house with its abodes, we are led to the real question which will be resolved by Christ's departure; abodes are to be made for the Father and the Son. The Father's house figures God abiding with His people, and in the Son they abide in the Father. Thus is the place for the disciples.

Much reasoning is associated with Bible Study, for there are many things stated in the Scriptures which reason cannot brook, and so Bible study becomes largely a matter of explaining how to avoid believing the Scriptures. We realise the severity of this observation, but it is made in view of the need that God be accorded glory as God. The saints are not in a category which guarantees against depriving God of His full Deity. Few, indeed, exercise that special privilege of according glory and thanks to God *because He is God*. Often our thoughts of Him, and our teachings about what He is doing are modulated, as though we were God's peers, as though we had planned the universe, as though we operated it. Even in the domain of salvation we think and speak in a manner which excludes the Deity of God and makes the prime factor to be human.

The Bible seems to be subject to human explanation, where Scripture is for faith. The Scriptures reveal God and His ways. If they reveal, it is because we cannot know otherwise. The Bible student argues that God cannot be the Saviour of all men. Such is the treatment of His word by human reasoning, whereas faith relies on the living God when He reveals that He is the Saviour of all mankind. Faith does not formulate arguments to adjust them to what seems likely to be true; nor does faith adopt the alternative course of ignoring that part of revelation. If we must reason, then this should be its form: God need not have used such language, but, since He has done so, then *He must mean what He says*. This accords glory to God *as God*.

WHOSOEVER WILL

It is "in the Bible" that humans have a will, and so the sphere of volition must be paramount ! But students of the Scriptures are not so much concerned with things which are "in the Bible" as they are with truth which God reveals; they know that the Scriptures also state that God operates the universe after the counsel of *His* own will. And if we are to reason, then the statement concerning *God's* operations must be the major factor, and we must put the "whosoever will" into its relative place. Real study considers contexts and notes the circumstances and time to which each scriptural statement refers; it notes how God's administrating differs in various eras; it never loses sight of the fact that God, in and through Christ, is moving to a consummation when He will be All in all.

Bible study is largely regulated by our human philosophies. We impose them, doubtless unconsciously, upon the matters we read in the Bible. Even amongst those who make so much headway as to go behind the Bible renderings, there are many who still labour under the incubus of their early training. They have dimly seen enough to go beneath the translation, yet they have not penetrated so far as to throw out all ideas and notions and begin to learn only from the Scriptures. To do this would indeed be Scripture study.

GOD'S PURPOSE

The various schools of Bible Study are now giving greater prominence to the idea that the Deity has a plan. They speak of God's plans and purposes. The study of scripture ought to bring the knowledge that God has only *one purpose*, but *many ways* within that one purpose. His ways are diverse in differing economies, yet all contributing to the one ultimate.

Moreover, God's ways in every administration, except in the one to which the name of Paul is attached, are but preparatory lessons to the people subjected to those ways. By these God will teach and lead the whole universe to see the necessity for that gracious gift of His own righteousness through the justification He is able

to achieve in Christ Jesus. Thus Paul's ministry, though in one sense exclusively for the present era, in its fullest outlook contains the essential requirement *upon which God bases His intention to reconcile all*.

God's ways in all eras have indicated the lack of righteousness in His creatures, but the Scriptures through Paul reveal God as *already* administering those features which will characterise that final future economy when God's ways have reached the situation immediately preceding His consummation. In that era God's righteousness is applied and reconciliation displayed. At present we may have the realisation of these blessings through faith in those Scriptures partitioned by God from other Scriptures under the name of Paul. We of this economy, if we know what God is now dispensing, are able in faith, and in spirit, to skip the enigmatic ways of the future which are still concerned with the old creation, and which are seen in the administrations which intervene for the earth; we anticipate the new creation which corresponds to the blessings of this era.

Though many readily agree that God has a plan, yet we find when it is examined that it is not the plan of the God of the Scriptures, for it affords only the results which the will of the creature allows to mature. Consequently, it is not a real plan at all, but merely fortuitous imaginings buttressed by texts from the Bible. The God of the Scriptures will head up the universe in Christ - in heaven as well as on earth. The last administration will complement the eras, and will lead to the consummation when God becomes All in all. Then will be seen the full fruit of righteousness and reconciliation and God revealed *as God*. At such a point will the Son of God, through Whom all has been achieved, become subject to Him Who subjected the universe to Him.

Such truths are not to be found in those records of the Master's ministry when He, in accord with the era, told them not to go off into a road of the nations. But they are found in the ministry which is based on God's severity to Israel whom He temporarily cast aside in order to reveal that consummation which rounds out all His ways and displays His glory beyond the heart of man's thoughts. That glory His Scriptures reveal, yet how few of His saints believe Him!

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