

GOD'S WORD - WRITTEN

or

The Purpose of the Bible

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The Purpose of the Bible

Every profession has its textbook and the Christian profession is no exception. That textbook is the Bible. The various branches of Christendom differ radically in many respects, but all of them have to appeal ultimately to the Bible. They must come to terms with it eventually and for one very good reason. They profess to believe, practise and make known the teaching of Christ. The only place where they can discover exactly Who Christ is and what He taught is in the Bible.

Religion has produced many outstanding leaders and teachers and nearly all of them have left some writing on record which sums up their beliefs and achievements, for example, Mahommed, who wrote the Koran, which is the Bible of the Mahommedans. But the greatest Teacher that has ever walked this earth left not one word of writing behind Him! This is remarkable indeed. The only time we read of Christ writing is when a sinful woman was brought to Him and He wrote on the ground with His finger (John 8:6,8).

Consequently, without the Bible, the Book that claims to reveal Christ, we should know practically nothing of Him. History could tell us such a Person once existed, for our calendar is marked A.D. - Anno Domini - in the year of the Lord. But Who is He? And what did He teach? These questions would remain for ever unanswered apart from the Scriptures. So to the Scriptures we must go if we want to embark on the greatest of all quests, that of getting to know God, His character and His ways.

At the outset questions are sure to be asked. How can we know the Bible is trustworthy? Is it a worthy revelation of God? Can we accept it as being truth?

First of all let us notice the great claim the Bible makes for itself. 2 Timothy 3:16 states '*All Scripture is given by inspiration of God*' (literally God-breathed) and one of its titles is *The Word of God*. Thus, although coming through human channels, it makes the stupendous claim of coming from God Himself and being a revelation of His mind and His purposes. Some may feel that this is impossible and asking too much to accept and believe. But before turning away, we would ask such to consider certain facts. These facts we will endeavour to bring before the reader straight away.

(1) *Numerics* - Underneath the Hebrew and Chaldee of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament there is hidden an extraordinary disposition of numbers which cannot be explained away on human grounds. In order to understand this we must remember that none of these languages had symbols for numbers such as we have (1,2,3,4, etc.). Instead of this they made use of the letters of their alphabet so that a=1, b=2 etc. One can easily see then that a word could be looked at in two ways, either as a *word* or as a series of *numbers* which could be added up to a total. For instance, the Greek for 'word' is 'logos'. If looked at from a numerical standpoint its value would be l=30, o=70, g=3, o=70, s=200: total 373. The numerical value of 'logos' is therefore 373.

If we were to look at the Greek text of the first eleven verses of the New Testament (Matt. 1:1-11), we should find an elaborate scheme of sevens underlying the words, which could not have been put there by chance, or even arranged by any human cleverness on Matthew's part. These verses contain 49 words (7x7). Of these 49 words, 28 (4x7) begin with a vowel, and 21 (3x7) begin with a consonant. These 49 words have 266 letters (7x2x19); this number is itself 38 sevens, and the sum of its factors is 28 (4x7). Of these 266 letters, 140 (20x7) are vowels, and 126 (18x7) are consonants. Of these 49 words 35 (5x7) occur more than once in the passage and 14 (2x7) occur only once. Seven occur in more than one form and 42 (6x7) occur only in one form. The 49 words are divided thus: 42 (6x7) are nouns (the name of something) and seven are not nouns. Of these nouns, 35 (5x7) are names of people and seven are ordinary nouns. Of these names, 28 (4x7) are male ancestors of Christ and seven are not. Thus, an elaborate system of sevens occurs in these few short verses of the Bible. If Matthew was *not* writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, what a headache he must have had trying to arrange all these sevens!

There is also a system of elevens in the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Scriptures and so wonderful is this that the chance of these figures occurring by accident rather than design (that is by the inspiration of God) is 1 in a number followed by 30 *noughts*, a billion million taken a million times! No one in his senses therefore could

argue that all this happened by accident or by human cleverness. Mathematics says *it could not do so*. This marvellous system of numbers occurs *right throughout the Scriptures* from Genesis to Revelation. Attempts have been made to find the same thing in human authors, specially those who lived about the same time as the writers of the Bible, but *no such system has been discovered*; it is only found in the Word of God. The smallness of our space prevents us from taking this subject any further, but readers who like figures may be stimulated to go into this aspect of things more fully.

(2) *The Unity of the Bible* - We must remember that the Bible was not written in a few years. Actually its writing was spread over nearly 2,000 years and all sorts of people were used by God to contribute to it, high, low, rich and poor, ranging from cattle keepers like Amos, and fishermen like Peter and John, to kings (David and Solomon). Imagine men of themselves arranging to write a book like this spread over such an immense period and allowing every sort of person to make his contribution. What a hotch potch it would be. Yet the Bible is not just an odd collection of books - it is a *unity*, every book pointing in some way to the Lord Jesus Christ and God's revealed plan through Him. Each shows some aspect of His wonderful Person and the work He came to earth to do, that is, to accomplish your salvation and mine.

(3) *The Evidence of Prophecy* - One of the most remarkable things about the Bible is the way it pin-points future events and lifts them out with definiteness and absolute accuracy. It is one thing to speak in a *general* way about the future, leaving plenty of loopholes for events to take this turn or that; it is quite another to tie them down to the smallest detail and still be perfectly correct in one's forecast. For instance, we could prophesy and say that next summer during the months of June, July and August there will be rain somewhere in the British Isles. That would be a very safe prophecy because we have made it so general. It would be an extraordinary thing if in England, Wales or Scotland there was no rain for a long period like three months. But supposing we were to say that on August 12th next year there will be heavy rain at 10.30 a.m. in the place where we live but nowhere else in the country, we should have made the prediction so definite, and multiplied the chances of being wrong so much, that it would be just as extraordinary if it actually came to pass.

Now the prophecies of Scripture are as definite as this, *but they are never wrong*, not one has failed or ever will fail. Let us look at the birth of Christ. Long before this happened an Old Testament prophet had forecast His birth, not in any vague way by saying it would occur somewhere in the East, but that it would take place in the little obscure village of Palestine called Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). How could he have known? It was impossible to obtain such knowledge from human sources as he wrote it *centuries before it actually occurred*, but Peter assures us that 'Prophecy came not in old time by the will of *man*: but holy men of God spake as they were moved *by the Holy Ghost*' (2 Pet. 1:21). Scriptural prophecy is God the Holy Spirit writing history in advance.

Coming now to the Crucifixion, the predictions of the Word of God become more and more remarkable. The following are Old Testament prophecies together with their New Testament fulfilment:

(1) The Lord's disciples were to forsake Him.

Prophecy: Zechariah 13:7

Fulfilment: Mark 14:27

'Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the Man that is My fellow, saith the LORD of Hosts: Smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered'.

'... Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall be offended because of Me this night: for it is written, I will smite the Shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered'.

(2) He was to be dumb before His accusers.

Prophecy: Isaiah 53:7

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:12-14

'He was oppressed, and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth: He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth'.

'And when He was accused of the chief priests and elders, He answered nothing. Then said Pilate unto Him, Hearest Thou not how many things they witness against Thee? And He

He openeth not His mouth'. answered him to never a word; insomuch that the governor marvelled greatly'.

(3) He was to be wounded and bruised.

Prophecy: Isaiah 53:5

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:26,30

'But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed'.

'... and when he (Pilate) had scourged Jesus, he delivered Him to be crucified ... And they spit upon Him, and took the reed, and smote Him on the head'.

(4) His hands and His feet were to be pierced.

Prophecy: Psalm 22:16

Fulfilment: Luke 23:33

'... the assembly of the wicked have inclosed Me: they pierced My hands and My feet'.

'And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified Him'.

(5) Yet none of His bones would be broken.

Prophecy: Exodus 12:46

Fulfilment: John 19:31-36

'In one house shall it (the passover lamb) be eaten ... neither shall ye break a bone thereof'.

'The Jews therefore ... besought Pilate that their (the malefactors') legs might be broken ... then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with Him. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that He was dead already, they brake not His legs ... For these things were done, that the Scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of Him shall not be broken'.

(6) He was to be crucified with thieves.

Prophecy: Isaiah 53:12

Fulfilment: Mark 15:27,28

'... He was numbered with the transgressors'.

'And with Him they crucify two thieves ... And the Scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And He was numbered with the transgressors'.

(7) He was to pray for His persecutors.

Prophecy: Isaiah 53:12

Fulfilment: Luke 23:34

'... He bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the

'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know

transgressors’.

not what they do’.

- (8) The people were to ridicule Him.

Prophecy: Psalm 22:7,8

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:41-43

‘All they that see Me laugh Me to scorn: they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted on the LORD that He would deliver Him: let Him deliver Him, seeing He delighted in Him’.

‘Likewise also the chief priests mocking Him, with the scribes and elders, said, He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He be the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let Him deliver Him now, if He will have Him’.

- (9) His garments were to be parted and lots cast for His vesture.

Prophecy: Psalm 22:18

Fulfilment: John 19:23,24

‘They part My garments among them, and cast lots upon My vesture’.

‘Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took His garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also His coat ... they said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it ... that the Scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted My raiment among them, and for My vesture they did cast lots’.

- (10) The Cry from the cross.

Prophecy: Psalm 22:1

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:46

‘My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?’

‘And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me?’

- (11) They were to give Him gall and vinegar to drink.

Prophecy: Psalm 69:21

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:34

‘They gave Me also gall for My meat; and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink’.

‘They gave Him vinegar to drink mingled with gall: and when He had tasted thereof, He would not drink’.

- (12) His body was to be pierced.

Prophecy: Zechariah 12:10

Fulfilment: John 19:34-37

‘... And they (Israel) shall look upon Me (Jehovah, verse 8)

‘But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced His side, and

Whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn ...’.

forthwith came there out blood and water. And he that saw it bare record, and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe. For these things were done, that the Scripture should be fulfilled, A bone of Him shall not be broken. And again another Scripture saith, They shall look on Him Whom they pierced’.

(13) His heart was to be broken.

Prophecy: Psalm 22:14

‘I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint: My heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of My bowels’.

Fulfilment: John 19:34

‘But one of the soldiers ... pierced His side, and forthwith there came out blood and water’.

(14) He was to be buried in a rich man’s grave..

Prophecy: Isaiah 53:9

‘... He made His grave with the wicked (plural), and with the rich (singular) in His death’.

Fulfilment: Matthew 27:57-60

‘When the even was come, there came a rich man of Arimathaea, named Joseph ... He went to Pilate, and begged the body of Jesus ... And when Joseph had taken the body, he wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had hewn out in the rock ...’.

Now bear in mind that all these prophecies were written some 1,000 to 500 years *before* these events occurred and that they all happened *literally*, not in any figurative way, exactly as had been stated by the Old Testament writers, and they all were *fulfilled in twenty-four hours*. Furthermore Psalm twenty-two vividly describes death by crucifixion. This form of punishment was used centuries later by the Romans. How, then, could the writer of the Psalm have known about it? And how can the above fourteen prophecies be explained? Not by chance, for no sane mind could believe that these statements were fourteen lucky guesses that literally came true in one day! The conclusion is inevitable, that the Bible is what it claims to be, the Word of God. No wonder Peter says, ‘We have also a more sure *word of prophecy*; whereunto ye do well that ye *take heed*’ (2 Pet. 1:19).

‘These (things) have been recorded in order that you may believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, through believing, you might have life through His Name’ (John 20:31, Weymouth’s translation).

(4) *Its indestructibility* - It can be said with truth that no book has had to withstand such enmity, opposition and vehement criticism as the Word of God. It has been the target of infidels, atheists and the enemies of Christianity for nearly 2,000 years and yet it not only survives today, but is the world’s best seller! There is no modern book that is printed in such quantities as the Bible; millions of copies are distributed every year by the Bible Societies of the world and somehow nothing can stop its circulation. It can be said with certainty that if an ordinary book had received a fraction of the opposition the Bible has endured it would never have survived. Voltaire, the noted French infidel, who died in 1778, stated that in one hundred years from his time, the Bible and Christianity would be swept from existence. Little did he know that after his death the very house in which he lived would be used by the

Geneva Bible Society and become a storehouse for the Scriptures whose vigour and freshness continue undiminished down to the present day! Nor can it be otherwise, for we are dealing with the 'Word of God which liveth and abideth for ever' (1 Pet. 1:23).

(5) *It endures translation* - When a book is translated into another language, something is bound to be lost, for the simple reason that the words of one language do not always have exact equivalents in another. We wonder what Shakespeare would be like in Chinese! The very thought is dreadful! Yet the Bible has been translated into *over 500 languages*, without losing any of its power and life-giving qualities. There is obviously something behind this Book that other books have not got, and that something is nothing less than the almighty power of God the Holy Spirit.

(6) *The witness of Archaeology* - One of the greatest evidences of the inspiration of the Scriptures has been furnished in the last seventy years or so by archaeology. What has been brought to light by the spade is positive evidence. It can be said straight away that nothing has been unearthed which disproves one verse of Scripture. Rather the opposite; the Word has been confirmed again and again and the theories of the critics routed. It used to be stated by opponents of the Bible that Moses could not possibly have written the first five books because writing was unknown in his day. Then came the discovery of the Tel-el-Armana tablets, now to be seen in the British Museum, and these prove conclusively that writing was in use 100 years before Moses lived! This is a large subject that cannot be dealt with properly in a work of this size, but to all who are interested we recommend the works of the archaeologist, Sir Charles Marston, *The Bible is True*, and *The Bible comes Alive*. Both are published by Messrs. Eyre & Spottiswoode.

(7) *The witness of Christ Himself* - Here we come to the supreme point. What was the attitude of the Lord Jesus Christ to the Scriptures? Let us quote His own words: 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, *but to fulfil*. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, *till all be fulfilled*' (Matt. 5:17,18). '*The Scripture cannot be broken*' (John 10:35). 'For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me: *for he wrote of Me*. But *if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?*' (John 5:46,47). To His opponents He said 'Ye do err, *not knowing the Scriptures*' (Matt. 22:29). How up-to-date this is!

And after His resurrection, when He made the stupendous claim '*All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth*' (Matt. 28:18), He said to the eleven apostles: 'All things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, concerning Me. Then opened He their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures' (Luke 24:44,45). These are not the words of One Who disbelieved the Scriptures, but rather of One Who endorsed them up to the hilt. To defeat Satan in the wilderness temptation it was sufficient for Him to quote three times 'It is written' (Matt. 4:4,7,10). The Lord used the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (Eph. 6:17), and we may be certain that a broken or mutilated sword would have accomplished nothing with so mighty a foe.

The Lord's constant attitude to the written Word was one of reverence and complete acceptance. This is clearly seen if the reader will consult Matthew 4:4,7,10; 11:10; 19:4; 21:13,42; 22:29; 26:31,56. The Scriptures, in His estimation, are divinely authoritative. His attitude then must be ours. *We cannot call ourselves true believers in Him if we adopt any attitude to the Word other than His*. He said 'Thy Word is Truth' (John 17:17) not merely that it contains truth, but *is the Truth* and the source of all spiritual light and blessing. The Lord Jesus also said 'The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment *unto the Son*' (John 5:22). 'He that rejecteth Me, and receiveth not My words, hath one that judgeth him: *the Word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him* in the last day' (John 12:48). We wonder how the reader of these words reacts to their truth? Here is an interview and a judgment in the future that no one can escape who rejects Christ. In view of this absolute certainty, do we feel quite happy? If not, we should think well on these words of the Lord: 'He that *heareth My Word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life*' (John 5:24).

Surely one of these points would be sufficient to lift this Book above all books, but the testimony of the seven put together is overwhelming to any reasonable mind. We can approach it therefore with the certainty that it is what it claims to be, the very Word of God, and thus we have something eternally secure upon which to rest our faith. In it we find nothing less than a revelation of the mind and will of God concerning His creation and the human race.

At this point we feel it would be wise to give some guiding principles regarding the interpretation of Scripture. We have seen that all the Bible is God-breathed and is a revelation of His Thoughts and His Truth to men. To reveal these He has used human language, but the problem for us is how to keep what is human and fallible from the translation and interpretation we place on this language. If this is not done, then the Word of God cannot speak with *authority* as God meant it to do, and it can give us no sure ground for our faith.

‘Thus saith the Lord’ is the way the Old Testament prophets spoke and this is the way the Bible as the revelation of God is intended to speak to us. Authority we must have; some place this in the human intellect, but this at the best is fallible, and therefore can never give us the certain basis that we need. Such criticize the Scriptures, forgetting that the Word of God is the supreme Critic, alive (quick) and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword, a *critic* (literally) of the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12). It is God’s province to judge us, not ours to judge Him. His Word sits in judgment on us; it is not our province to sit in judgment on His Word. Such subjectivism, at its root, is nothing more than the parent sin of pride and rebellion: the refusal to subjugate the human mind and reason to God, thus turning it into an idol, which is in itself the very spirit of antichrist.

The apostle Paul does not hesitate to refer to the Old Testament as the *Holy Scriptures* (2 Tim. 3:15), and if this is true of the Old Testament, it must be true of the New Testament also, for the two are indissolubly linked together. So we find that the apostle Peter includes the epistles of Paul with *the other Scriptures* (2 Pet. 3:16). Paul himself asserts that his letter to the church at Corinth was ‘the commandments of the Lord’ (1 Cor. 14:37) and ‘words which the Holy Ghost teacheth’ (1 Cor. 2:13), and the Thessalonian church is commended because, what they received through his ministry, they treated as the ‘Word of God’ and not the word of man (1 Thess. 2:13). The Christians at Ephesus had been taught by Christ (Eph. 4:21). It is extremely unlikely that any of them had come under the Lord’s ministry in Palestine in the days of His earthly life. This can only mean that they had received the teaching given through Paul as the *Word of Christ*. As later expressed in 1 Timothy 6:3, it was ‘wholesome words, even *the words of our Lord Jesus Christ*’.

Both the Old and New Testaments are God’s writings; they are sacred and must therefore be treated with the utmost reverence and respect, for otherwise how can we hope to receive understanding and blessing from them? Our aim then is to handle the Word of God carefully and wisely so that, as far as it is possible, the human element with its fallibility is excluded in its interpretation. If this is not done, the Bible can be made to mean anything, and truth cannot possibly be realized. As a preparation, two things are necessary.

(1) The determination to *search* the Scriptures. God’s Word contains inexhaustible spiritual wealth, but His jewels are not scattered on the surface; we must be prepared to *dig* for them. God has little use for lazy Christians who are prepared to receive everything second hand, without any effort on their part. Just as a person cannot do proper gardening without tools such as a spade or fork, so the believer cannot properly dig into the Scriptures without the aid of a good concordance. This is a real necessity, and we recommend Young’s *Analytical Concordance* for this purpose.

(2) There must be prayer for, and dependence upon the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Man’s intellect, unaided by God, cannot understand and assimilate Divine Truth. ‘The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God ... neither can he (get to) know them, because they are spiritually discerned’ (1 Cor. 2:14). Human cleverness or education by itself cannot discover it. While we greatly value Christian scholarship, scholars as such have no monopoly of the Holy Spirit; in fact scholarship, unless kept subservient to God’s revealing power, can be an effective bar to its realization. Many scholars have become blinded by their own scholarship. The Truth of God is *spiritually discerned*, and God is willing to bestow this understanding on all who are humble and childlike enough to receive and sincerely seek for it. Christ said ‘I thank Thee, O Father ... because Thou hast hid these things from the *wise and prudent*, and hast *revealed them unto babes*’ (Matt. 11:25). It is only in the spirit of lowliness and humility that we can receive enlightenment from God. We must also be ready to *unlearn* as well as to learn. It is often difficult to cast wrong ideas from the mind, especially when they have become ingrained through faulty teaching and upbringing. But this is essential if truth is to enter and take possession of our thinking.

Carefully note the following:

- (1) Take the Bible *literally* and in its *simple meaning*, unless it directly contradicts other Scriptures or is opposed to known and proven facts. In this case possibly a figure of speech is being used. We will say something about figures of speech later on. Just as a human writer presumably means what he sets down in writing, so God must mean what He says and have a meaning for everything He says, otherwise His Word can never speak with authority to the human mind.
- (2) Remember that every text has a *context*, something goes before it and something comes after it. To take a text from its context is dangerous and can nullify its meaning. Much error has resulted from this practice.
- (3) Aim to discover the meaning of the original text, that is the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. If one has not the knowledge to do this, then obtain several good translations and compare them, such as the Revised Version, Rotherham, Weymouth, etc. By this means various shades of meaning will become apparent.
- (4) Try to find what the passage in question meant to the *original readers*. While the Word of God is a Unity, yet each of its books was *sent* by God to a section of His people at a particular time when they needed a particular aspect of truth, and while this may be amplified in course of time if it has a prophetic significance, *it will never conflict with its original meaning*. All the books of the Bible are very much like letters; they have their names and addresses on the envelope at the beginning. The book of Isaiah was written concerning *Judah and Jerusalem* (Isa. 1:1), and therefore its message is *primarily* to Judah and Jerusalem. The epistle of James is addressed to the 'twelve tribes scattered abroad', i.e. the Hebrew Christians of the Dispersion (1:1).

Note how the word 'send' is used in the Acts of the Apostles. Peter speaks of 'the word which *God sent* unto the children of Israel', referring to the early ministry in this book (Acts 10:36). Later on, Paul says, 'Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent' (Acts 13:26). The Divine purpose at this point was widening, the salvation of God being sent to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. Genesis 12:3 is in view. At the end of the Acts, Israel by their rejection of the Divine offer of mercy and forgiveness recorded in Acts 3:19-26, go into their present spiritual blindness and darkness, and the apostle then declared 'The salvation of God is *sent* unto the Gentiles (i.e. apart from Israel the nation), and that they will hear it' (Acts 28:28).

We do well to note to whom God addresses His Word. There is a type of believer who imagines that every page of the Bible is addressed to him and is *about* him. Such often complain of being robbed of truth when the error of this idea is pointed out. They need to remember that the eighth commandment, 'Thou shalt not steal', can be broken in more than one way. Such spiritual selfishness must be avoided if light and blessing is desired. All is indeed written *for* our learning and profit, but not all the Scripture is specifically addressed *to* us as Gentiles, or members of the Church, the Body of Christ.

- (5) The Bible is not only the Word of God. It is made up of the *Words* of God. The apostle Paul does not hesitate to speak of 'Words ... which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual' (1 Cor. 2:13), and the Lord Jesus not only said 'I have given them Thy *Word*' (John 17:14), but also 'I have given unto them the *Words* which Thou gavest Me' (17:8). This means that Scripture should be compared with Scripture. The Bible is its own commentary, and difficulty in one passage may be solved by comparison with other passages. There is no need to go outside the Word of God to solve spiritual problems. Note also the way the Holy Spirit uses words He has caused to be written. This is most important and here a concordance is a necessity. We can be sure that 'words which the Holy Ghost teacheth' are used with exactness and will bear the closest examination we can put upon them. One of the delights of the seeker after Truth is to discover the perfection of God's Words. They are indeed 'pure words' (Psa. 12:6).

(6) Carefully note the time periods of the Bible. Some portions of Divine revelation are only true for a certain period, for example, the Old Testament sacrifices foreshadowing the One Perfect Sacrifice on Calvary's Cross. Others are true for all time, e.g. sin, and its only remedy, God's salvation in Christ Jesus. We must learn to distinguish these two different kinds of truth. One is basic - permanent truth; the other is limited for a certain period during which it is administered and is called dispensational truth. A dispensation in the Scriptures is the administration of some particular truth of God, and the word should not be used as though it was in itself just a period of time and therefore equivalent to an age. The time element only enters into it inasmuch as such truth has a beginning and an end. The sincere Bible student should carefully and prayerfully weigh over the portion of Scripture being studied in the light of the foregoing statements. Much error and confusion is caused by the inability to distinguish between truth that is *basic and permanent* and truth that is *dispensational*.

(7) Figures of speech are words used out of their ordinary sense to attract attention and emphasize. They are warm and vivid ways of presenting literal facts and we use them in speech and writing unconsciously day in and day out. They are used in God's Word too, and when we come across them we must seek to discover the *literal fact underlying the figure* and not take the figure itself literally. If we say 'the ground is dry in drought' we make a plain statement of fact. If we say 'the ground is *thirsty* in drought' we are using figurative language, for the ground cannot actually feel or experience thirst. But we have not detracted from the plain statement of fact that the ground is dry. Rather, we have made the literal fact of dryness more vivid by saying the ground is *thirsty*. So while in Scripture figures of speech are used, this does not alter what we have stated under (1) concerning taking the Bible literally wherever possible.

(8) Symbols are used largely in the prophetic books of the Bible, such as Daniel and the Book of the Revelation. Very often the Holy Spirit explains the symbol that is used, and when this is so we are wise if we do not seek to *reinterpret God's interpretation*. If we do, error is sure to creep in. For instance, the stars which the apostle John saw in the Risen Lord's right hand are symbols, and He explains them as representing the *angels* of the seven churches (Rev. 1:20). This should be sufficient for the humble seeker after truth. In some cases the true meaning of a symbol can only be arrived at by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

(9) Parables. Concentrate on the central point and do not seek to find spiritual significance in every detail. In the Parable of the prodigal son it would be a mistake to try and find the spiritual equivalent of the ring placed on the prodigal's finger or what the fatted calf represents. When this kind of thing is done, fanciful and far-fetched expositions result which can only lead away from truth and not to it.

(10) Be accurate in reading a passage of Scripture and careful not to read into it what is not there. How easy it is to read into God's Word what we want to find there and to miss what is there all the time!

(11) Distinguish between *interpretation* and *application* of the Word of God. Interpretation deals first of all with those to whom the passage of Scripture is addressed as we have pointed out under (4). When this has been settled, and not till then, are we in a position to apply the passage to ourselves or others, and only then if this is consistent with Truth revealed for this present age of Grace. The primary interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy from first to last is to *Judah and Jerusalem* as the opening verse declares. When we read the wonderful fifty-third chapter which deals with the suffering Saviour bearing sin and the shame and death of the Cross, it is still *Israel* that is *primarily* in view. After we have realized this, then we can also say 'He was wounded for *our* transgressions, He was bruised for *our* iniquities' (Isa. 53:5). We are then in a true position to apply this wondrous passage of Scripture to ourselves.

Above all avoid *spiritualizing*. This is not the same as making a legitimate application of Scripture such as we have just done. Spiritualizing avoids the primary interpretation and the literal meaning of a passage, and instead fastens upon it so called spiritual ideas which are really nothing more than the personal opinion of the person concerned or the denomination or school to which he or she belongs. This is the surest way of introducing fallible human ideas into God's pure Word of Truth, and as those who indulge in this practice seldom agree among themselves, the result is confusion and division among the people of God.

(12) The final aim of studying the written Word is to come into touch by faith with the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, and *this is the most important point of all*. The whole Bible points to Him, and that is why, after His Resurrection, the Lord expounded to His disciples walking to Emmaus, *the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures* (Luke 24:27,44). He had earlier said:

‘Search the Scriptures, for ... they are *they which testify of Me*’ (John 5:39).

‘For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed Me: *for he wrote of Me*. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe My words?’ (John 5:46,47).

To the ten disciples (Thomas was absent and Judas was probably dead) the Risen Saviour declared:

‘These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, *concerning Me*’ (Luke 24:44).

To miss Him therefore in our Bible study is to *miss our way entirely*.

Now all this may seem complicated, but actually in practice it is nothing more than a sane and reverent way of handling the Holy Scriptures and recognizing that the Word of God is primarily a Book of Redemption, meeting man’s deepest needs and revealing, in some measure at least, what a gracious God intends to do with the creation He has made and those who come under His redeeming Love. In all our Bible Study and searching for Divine Truth, may we be able to say with the Psalmist, ‘I rejoice at Thy Word, as one that findeth great spoil’ (Psa. 119:162), or Jeremiah when he said ‘Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart’ (Jer. 15:16).

But someone may say, I see the importance of all this, but where am I to start when I want to read and study the Bible? Do I commence with Genesis chapter 1, or somewhere in the middle of the Old Testament? Or shall I begin with the New Testament? Let us say straight away that we sympathise with the inquirer. The Bible is a long book, dealing with an amazing variety of subjects, much of which appears, on the surface, to be unconnected. Perhaps, however, we can find within its covers some principle to guide us. We have already pointed out that the Word of God is a signpost directing us always to the Lord Jesus Christ. This is of the first importance and must never be forgotten. But in and through Him, God has been pleased to reveal His plan and purpose for the earth and for the heavens, the *Bible being a record of this plan. It is a Book of Divine purpose*. In Ephesians 3:11 we read ‘According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord’. A more literal rendering would be ‘According to the purpose of the ages which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord’. From this we see that time (the ages) is a platform, as it were, upon which God is working out a great redemptive plan for His creation and this is centred in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. Genesis 1:1 commences with the creation of the heaven and the earth and so we find in the Word of God this wondrous plan has a heavenly part and also an earthly part.

In 2 Timothy 1:8,9 we read, ‘God, Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but *according to His own purpose* and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus ...’. Here the apostle Paul tells us how we can have a share in this mighty purpose, and there is only one way and that is by salvation. It is not much use studying God’s plan for heaven and earth, if we ourselves are outside of it, and so the reader is asked plainly and directly - is this salvation yours? Have you taken this necessary step for coming within the plan and purpose of God? If you have put your trust simply and sincerely in the Lord Jesus Christ and taken Him to be your own personal Saviour, you can be described truthfully by Romans 8:28 ‘the called according to His purpose’. *You are inside the plan and eternally secure*. If you have never taken this step think seriously for a moment. God is slowly working to bring the whole of His creation back again to perfection and beauty. Everything that mars will be eradicated when this has been finally fulfilled, for God will not have one sin or one sinner to spoil His goal.

‘The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom *all things that offend, and them which do iniquity*’ (Matt. 13:41).

‘Every plant, which My Heavenly Father hath not planted, *shall be rooted up*’ (Matt. 15:13).

‘There shall in no wise enter into it (the Heavenly Jerusalem) *any thing that defileth*, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie’ (Rev. 21:27).

These are exceedingly serious statements, and they describe all who are outside of Christ and unsaved. On the other hand to know Him as Saviour means that He will wash away *all* our sins and clothe us with His own perfection, so that when we meet Him one day (and we surely shall) we shall do so as perfect creatures without the slightest possibility of condemnation (Rom. 8:1).

We will now go further and search the Scriptures in order to discover what they teach concerning the earthly part of this plan. First of all Isaiah 45:18 tells us that God created the earth in order that it might be *inhabited*, so we can

be assured that the goal of creation was not the earth itself or the myriads of worlds around us, great and wonderful though they are, but MAN. Read Psalm 8:4-8 in this connection. However, in the opening chapters of Genesis, we find a great complication entering in which is directly opposed to the will and purpose of God, and this is SIN:

‘By one man *sin* entered into the world, and *death* by sin’ (Rom. 5:12),

and because death is universal there is no need to argue to prove that:

‘All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’ (Rom. 3:23).

Not only this, but the earth itself has become involved in this terrible tragedy as Romans 8:21,22 asserts. The conflict we see around us in nature is only an external evidence of this fact. Consequently the original purpose in the creation of heaven and earth has been held up, as it were, by sin and death, and the bulk of the Bible therefore is taken up with the way God is going to remove these great enemies to His revealed will.

We can now understand, in some measure, the reason for the wonderful work of redemption accomplished by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, for He came to put away sin righteously by the sacrifice of Himself on the Cross of Calvary as the Sin Bearer and to abolish death for ever. This is God’s basis upon which He can bring His creation back to its original perfection and beauty, and how human beings who are sinners by nature can be made righteous and absolutely free from the taint of sin and failure, and therefore have a glorious share in the new heaven and earth that will be spotless and perfect (see 2 Pet. 3:13 and Rev. 21:1-4,23-27). This great salvation can be ours if we will receive the Lord Jesus by simply trusting Him to be our Saviour, or, expressing it another way, if we put our faith in Him alone. God will then reckon His righteousness to be our own possession. If this step has not been taken, we ask the reader to turn to the following Scriptures and see how true this can be personally. These passages are 2 Corinthians 5:20,21, and Ephesians 2:8,9. As we have said before, it is not much use our reading about the Divine plan in the Bible if we are for ever outside it. This would be a tragedy of the first magnitude.

As the Word of God is studied and believed it becomes evident that the Creator concentrates first of all upon the earth and shows us how he is going to remove the effects of sin and death from His creation and bring in His glorious kingdom, so that at the last it can be said in truth ‘The kingdoms of *this world* are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever and ever’ (Rev. 11:15).

Now there are at least two ways in which God can do this. The same Almighty Voice that said ‘Let there be light: and there was light’ (Gen. 1:3), that is, without the assistance of any creature, could obviously carry on His work indefinitely in the same way, majestic and alone. On the other hand He could use agents to carry out His will if He chose, while not being dependent in any way upon them. This is precisely what we find Him doing in His matchless condescension and grace. He is pleased to use redeemed men and women, and young people who are wise enough to place themselves in His almighty hand and find out by prayer what His will is for them (Col. 1:9; Eph. 5:17).

Coming then to the earthly side of the plan of the ages, we find its first unfolding in the call of Abram recorded in Genesis 12:1-3. Note the words ‘I will’ in verses 2 and 3, ending with ‘and in thee (Abram) shall *all* families of the earth be blessed’. Now Abram, or Abraham as he was afterwards called, is the father of Israel, and that is why the Jewish nation figures so largely in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. They were to be redeemed by God and then become the agents for world-wide blessing. To make this sure and true, God promises Abram a posterity or a seed that would endure, and this we find in Genesis 15:5 and many other passages:

‘And He (God) brought him (Abram) forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and He said unto him, *So shall thy seed be*’.

Not only this, but to be practical the seed must be guaranteed a home to dwell in and in the later verses we read ‘In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto *thy seed* have I given *this land*, from the river of Egypt (the Nile) unto the great river, the River Euphrates’ (Gen. 15:18). Look at a map and see the extent of this wondrous gift. The reader will note that it is considerably larger than Palestine and perhaps will now appreciate why it is that this part of the globe has always figured prominently in human affairs, and why it looms so large today in the gigantic problems connected with the Middle East.

It is a fact of history that the Jew has never completely possessed this portion of the earth, although a foreshadowing took place during the reign of Solomon. In 1 Kings 4:21 and 2 Chronicles 9:26, we are told that his dominion was from the river (Euphrates) to the *border* of Egypt. This is not so extensive as the promise of Genesis 15 for it does not include Egypt and the boundary of the Nile, and while Solomon, for political and commercial reasons, was able to control territory *outside* Palestine, yet the twelve tribes went no further than this stretch of land as 1 Kings 4:25 states: 'Judah and Israel dwelt safely, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, *from Dan even to Beersheba*, all the days of Solomon'. Reference to a map will show that this was the extreme north and south of Palestine only, and therefore it is certain that the Jew has never yet enjoyed as his inheritance the complete territory promised in Genesis 15:18. To suggest, as some expositors do, that the reign of Solomon for forty years fulfils this Scripture is obviously wrong and would be in the nature of an anticlimax, to say the least, after the solemn and spacious promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This period is a foreshadowing only, leaving the complete fulfilment to a future day when God will honour His word to the letter, and not in the free and easy way mentioned above.

Notice that the Scripture always connects the *land* and the *seed* together, and as the land is literal, the seed must be literal too (cf. Gen. 26:3,4 and 28:13,14). As we have before emphasized, the Divine intention is finally to embrace the Gentile world as well as the Jew, consequently we shall not be surprised to find in the New Testament that the Gentile believer, as a partaker of Israel's spiritual things and their covenant blessings (Rom. 15:26,27), is counted as being part of Abraham's seed (Gal. 3:7-9,29) and as being blessed *with* him (verse 9). This is a picture of the glorious time when *all* the families of the earth shall be blessed, and he will then be, in the fullest sense, the *heir of the world* as Romans 4:13 describes him.

Returning to the Old Testament, we find that this is a long historical record of God's preparation of the Jewish race for the part that they were to play in being His agents for world blessing. What a long time it seemed to take, but this fact only emphasizes Israel's sin and their slowness to learn God's ways. You may think that the Jews were, on the whole, a bad nation. The period covered by their kings and prophets was a black one indeed, almost unrelieved failure and departure from God. Why then did not God cast them off? Because He cannot break His promises, and is a God of wonderful patience and long-suffering. The New Testament also stresses this, for Peter writes in his second epistle (3:9), 'The Lord is ... *longsuffering* to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance'. It may be, dear reader, that this Divine forbearance has been waiting a long time for *your response* to the redeeming love shown on Calvary's cross. Have you yet placed your faith in Christ alone as your Saviour and Sinbearer? If not, do not trifle with the long-suffering of God, for the Scriptures make it clear that this wondrous patience will have an end one day, and that perhaps sooner than you think:

'... *now* is the accepted time; behold *now* is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 6:2),

and the word *now* means this very day you are reading these lines, not tomorrow or the future which you cannot know or count on with certainty. Do not forget that the Saviour said, 'Him that *cometh to Me* I will in no wise cast out' (John 6:37).

He promises to receive you just as you are, so what is there to stop your coming to Him in simple faith *NOW*?