

The Limitations of Scripture

By CHARLES H. WELCH

'For I am conscious of nothing in myself, nevertheless am I not justified ... So then do not judge anything before the time, until the Lord shall come ... Learn in us the lesson of not letting your thoughts go beyond the things that are written' (1 Cor. 4:4-6).

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We can imagine that some of our readers will read the title of this article with some misgivings, and we hasten to explain our meaning so as to avoid giving unnecessary pain or anxiety to those who love the Word of God. To say what we do *not* mean will help us to make clear what we do mean by the title.

We do not mean to suggest the slightest distrust in the Word of God. We rejoice to be able out of a full heart to say that we believe 'All Scripture is God-breathed'. We believe that not only is Scripture inspired in its general outline, but that divine inspiration extends to the very language and choice of individual words and phrases.

What do we mean then by the limitations of Scripture? We mean that the Scriptures nowhere claim that they contain the record of all God's purposes and ways, but that such glimpses of those unfathomable depths and infinite heights are given us as our finite capabilities will allow. If I turn to the writings of men I find that many of them deal with subjects which go entirely beyond the inspired limits of Scripture. Revelation starts with God as Creator, 'In (*the*) beginning God created the heaven and the earth' (Gen. 1:1). Man's theology is not content with this, it must probe into that over which God has drawn a veil. Man's theology and philosophy come to us and say, 'God never had a beginning'. Within the limits of human experience and reason *that which never had a beginning does not exist*. In vain we attempt to conceive otherwise. The blessed fact we would point out is that God Himself has never burdened our minds with such a statement. He Who on earth could say, 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now', has also, in the wider scope of the complete Scriptures, given us just so much as we are capable of understanding here.

Have we never felt when searching the Scriptures upon some theme the desire for some further explanation which God has been pleased to withhold? Is there no truth in the words of Zophar the Naamathite, 'Canst thou by searching find out God?' Do we not need the rebuke of Job 36:26, 'Behold, God is great, and we know Him not, neither can the number of His years be searched out'. 'Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection?' (Job 11:7). In the highest revelation given to us are there not 'unsearchable riches'? Are we not endeavouring to get to know the love of Christ which *passeth* knowledge? Did not the apostle, when concluding the revelation of God's ways with Israel, rightly say:

'O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how *unsearchable* are His judgments, and His ways *past finding out*! For who hath known the mind of the Lord (knowledge)? or who hath been His counsellor (wisdom)? or who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again (riches)?' (Rom. 11:33-35).

Is there no suggestion of mystery in the destiny of such an one as Pharaoh, or of Esau as recorded in Romans 9? Does not inspiration anticipate our natural desire to find out more than is revealed, and does it not meet it with the words, 'Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?' (Rom. 9:20). There are many who speak as though the Bible deals with eternity; *it does no such thing*. It begins and ends with time. It is the inspired revelation of some of God's ways and purposes relative to and during the AGES. What took place before the age times began we know very little, and of what will take place when these ages have run their allotted course we know comparatively nothing. Is it not wiser, better, and

more befitting us as those who have been saved by grace, to recognize the wisdom and the kindness which underlie this withholding of information?

Think of the errors which have clustered around the wrong translation of *aion*. Instead of honestly rendering the word 'age', the translators assumed that it must refer to eternity, and so wherever possible they rendered it by words which indicate eternity, and that which is everlasting. Has not the book of Ecclesiastes been written in order that we may be led to see the utter impossibility of pushing beyond that which it has pleased God to reveal to us? 'He hath set the world (*olam*, the age) in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh *from the beginning to the end*' (Eccles. 3:11). Is there no word for us here? Are we quite sure that we, if taught by the Spirit of God, can hope to find out the work that God maketh *from the beginning to the end*? Some of God's children appear to think so. With all our heart we sympathize with them. Problems press hard upon us all. Believing implicitly in the full inspiration of Scripture, and believing, moreover, that outside its sacred pages there is found no light upon these matters, many have come to the conclusion that by prayerful painstaking study, by careful collocation, the whole range of God's purposes will at length be discovered. Indeed this is no longer a supposition. Many of our readers will have read already articles from the pens of earnest Bible students who believe that they have pieced the whole together, and who do not hesitate to teach us what is to take place after Satan, and those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life, are cast into the Lake of Fire. At this point exposition ceases, and inference enters. There is no written revelation given us as to anything happening to those who are thus consigned to the second death. True, passages of tremendous import are brought to bear upon the subject, but it is only by way of deduction. This immediately puts the whole subject beyond the limits of inspiration, and we distrust our own heart too much to allow ourself to be drawn beyond the divine limits.

When the reader opens the sacred volume he soon becomes aware that much must have taken place which is unrecorded. He can discover by what is written in Isaiah 45:18 that the earth was not created 'without form and void', but that it *became* so. He can further discover that 'the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished' (2 Pet. 3:5,6), but he will not find recorded the many details which his natural mind would lead him to enquire into. In the third chapter of Genesis the Serpent, who is afterwards discovered to be Satan, is introduced without any explanation as to how he came to be in the condition of enmity against God that we find to be the case. The Scriptures reveal glimpses into the exalted rank, awful ambition, and fearful fall of Satan, but *why* he was thus allowed to sin and all the many problems of the philosopher regarding the origin of evil remain unsolved.

Is it for us, when Scripture is silent, to attempt to force an answer by turning to the oracles of philosophy and human reason? If God has hidden, shall we not rather bow the knee in submission? Must we know all? Is there no room for faith? Are not the words of Job 42:1-6 a more fitting attitude of mind? Job was troubled by the problem of evil. His friends sought to administer comfort, but in vain. He never received an answer to the problem. All that we can learn is recorded by James, 'that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy'.

There are many expressions in Ecclesiastes which teach us that a calm rest in the Lord, whether we fully understand all His ways or not, is His will for us here. 'God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time *THERE* for every purpose and for every work' (Eccles. 3:17). 'Surely oppression maketh a wise man mad' (Eccles. 7:7). Those who fail to see that God's purpose is over all must, when they contemplate the oppression on every hand, feel driven almost to desperation, but the consciousness that though *HERE* evil prospers, there is a time *THERE* for every purpose and for every work; this will keep us in the right attitude before God. The reason for the dissatisfaction of the writer of Ecclesiastes is recorded in chapter 7, verses 25-29. It is written as an example and a warning. He did not abide by what was written; no, he would find out 'the *reason* of things'. What did he find? He found, by a bitter experience that wrecked his whole career, that which he could have known by what had been written for his guidance in the Proverbs. In those proverbs written for the guidance of the young Solomon we read again and again warnings about the flattering woman. Solomon had been given, in Proverbs 31:10-31, a description of the woman God would have him choose for his wife. Instead of this he wanted to know by experience the 'wickedness of folly', and he says:

'I find more bitter than death the woman, whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands' (Eccles. 7:26).
'Behold, this have I found, saith the preacher, counting one by one, to find out the account: which yet my soul seeketh, but I find not: one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found' (Eccles. 7:27,28).

Poor Solomon! we see him with his 'three score queens and four score concubines, and virgins without number' (Song of Sol. 6:8) still unsatisfied (1 Kings 11:3 reveals the fact that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines,

making a thousand in all). What a pitiable object lesson! In the last chapter the preacher gives the 'conclusion of the whole matter'.

'Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole (duty) of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil' (Eccles. 12:13,14).

All the searching, reasoning and speculating led him no further into truth, but rather entangled him in confusion. Believers today, under an entirely different dispensation, and with the added advantage of a complete Bible, are equally frail and human, and the moment we leave what is written for deductions based upon our own limited and prejudiced observations, we too must inevitably make shipwreck. Solomon failed, even though he retained the wisdom which was given him by God. Are we wiser than Solomon when we venture beyond the written Word? We are so conscious of our limited knowledge in view of these tremendous themes, that we dare not assume finality in any one particular doctrine. Our only hope is to keep absolutely loyal to what *God has said*, and to remember that the moment we go beyond and supplement God's revelation by our deductions and theories, the moment we criticize His right to hide as well as to reveal, that moment we embark on a voyage chartless and rudderless, saved from shipwreck only by a miracle of grace.

Yet one more consideration. In Daniel 10:21 and 11:2 there is a statement which is worthy of careful study.

'And I will shew thee that which is noted in the Scripture of truth'.

'And now will I shew thee the truth'.

The angel proceeds to give a most marvellously detailed account, first of the events which were about to take place within a comparatively short time of this announcement, and then of the yet future events of the time of the end, or as he says in Daniel 10:14, 'Now I am come to make thee understand what shall befall thy people in the latter days'. The point to which we would direct the reader's attention is that what the angel came to tell Daniel was already 'noted (writing, 5:24,25; sign, 6:8,9) in the Scripture of truth'. What Scripture? The events foretold in Daniel 11 are not found written in any of the Scriptures which had been given up to the time of Daniel. If this be so, the expression suggests the idea that there may be Scriptures of truth to which the angels have access, and that the Scriptures which we possess contain selections, given by God at different intervals, from that heavenly scroll which contains possibly ever so much more than we can as yet grasp. The angels do not know everything. Principalities and powers are learning now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God.

We certainly do not possess a complete account of all God's purposes. Daniel 11 shews us that He knew fully, and had recorded in the Scriptures to which the angel had access the doings of the kings of Persia and of Greece. We are sure that His knowledge was not limited in the least, and that He knew the complete course of the history of Greece and Persia, although the Scriptures we have received do not treat of their histories beyond the scope of the particular purpose for which they have been written. Our Bible centres around Israel and Jerusalem. Whenever a nation came into touch with Israel, they came within the scope of revelation. Is it not certain that the One who wrote the history of Israel from start to finish could write the history of England or France equally as well? Certainly, and for aught we know the Scriptures of truth from which the angel took the small portion given in Daniel 11 recorded the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, and the complete histories of all the nations of the earth.

At once we see how limited the Scriptures really are, and that by divine appointment. There are lines of truth which enter the sacred record in Genesis which commenced a long way back before the record of Genesis begins. When we read that Satan abode not in the truth, we have a statement which we believe, but we are all only too conscious that the revelation is also exceedingly limited. We do not know anything of Satan's sin or circumstances; if it had been necessary and right for us to have known, the Lord could have given us a most graphic and detailed account. Ezekiel 28:17 suggests that by pride he fell. The lesson is clear, but details which would minister to our curiosity are withheld. When the risen Lord spoke His wondrous words to the disciples, as recorded in Luke 24, we read that He began at Moses and the prophets (verse 27). He could have begun much earlier. He could have told of the time when Satan fell, and even have given definite instructions regarding the many problems upon which the minds of men have speculated for all time. He could have settled in a few words the problem of the introduction, permission and purpose of evil. We are not told that He did any such thing, but 'beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded (or interpreted) unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself'.

From our reading of the Word we have come to see that *eternity* is nowhere its theme. The Bible is entirely taken up with the purpose of the ages. Even then we have to see that the Bible largely passes over much that we would like to know within the limits even of the ages, and focuses our attention first upon the chosen people of

Israel, and for a short space upon the church of the present dispensation. Its object is not so much to explain all to us, but to guide us during this our pilgrimage with the happy knowledge that in resurrection glory we shall have time and opportunity to become acquainted with the wider revelation of God's purposes and ways. The following diagram may be suggestive:



Let us not attempt to force back the roll beyond the appointed limits. Let us be content to say of such things that we do not know, because God has not told us. We shall be more pleasing to Him by so doing, than if we take the responsibility upon ourselves of completing the revelation which He has purposely left unfinished. Once more we would remark that in all that we have said we desire it to be understood that we are not questioning or doubting God's Holy Word, but rather bow before His sovereignty, acknowledging with grateful love the absolute inspiration of all that He *has* revealed, and acknowledging equally the sovereign wisdom that lies behind the withholding of much that we might have expected to be written.

Let us keep close to what is written. Let us be content with what God *has* said, and if some lines of truth *appear* to conflict, let us not attempt to reconcile them, for the very attempt savours of unbelief, but let us be assured that when we see the complete purpose unfolded, all will be perfect and harmonious, and transcend the highest flight of our present imaginations.

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