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**STUDIES**  
**IN THE**  
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*“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39*

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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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# STUDIES IN THE SCRIPTURES

*“Search the Scriptures” John 5:39*

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EDITOR: Arthur W. Pink

## BITTER THINGS

“Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil...that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!” (Isa 5:20). Deplorable indeed is the case of those who are incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, who confound objects so radically dissimilar. Yet such by nature is the sad case with all of us. Our understanding is darkened, so that we are unable to perceive the real nature of things. Our wicked hearts deceive us into imagining that profitable exercises are a waste of time, and that pursuits which end in misery are pleasant. Instead of calling the Sabbath a delight (Isa 58:13), it is a weariness to the ungodly (Amo 8:5). They spend their strength for that which is not bread, and their labour for that which satisfies not (Isa 55:2). They mistake licentiousness for liberty, and the light yoke of Christ for a heavy burden. True wisdom is regarded as folly, and her ways (which are peaceful) as paths to be shunned. Thus do they befool and cheat their own souls. Instead of making God their chief good, He is abhorred, and Satan, their worst enemy, is served.

“And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour: and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage” (Exo 1:13-14). The curse which the fall has called down upon man is a multiple one. It has not only alienated him from God, slain his spiritual life, and polluted his entire being, but it has also brought him into abject subjection to sin and Satan. Solemnly and graphically is this aspect of his misery depicted in Exodus 1. Pharaoh, who adumbrated the devil, was a most cruel tyrant over those who were in his power. He loaded them with intolerable burdens and treated them in a barbarous manner. He heaped one job upon another, and set over them taskmasters, who beat them mercilessly when they relaxed. Thus, the Hebrews had no ease of body and no comfort of mind. And such, my reader, is how Satan treats *his* captives, forcing them to employ their strength and talents in his hard service. For the most part, they realize it not, for sin so completely infatuates its victims as to make them in love with their bonds and unconscious

of their burdens. Nevertheless, they have been taken captive by the devil at his will (2Ti 2:26) and are “serving divers lusts” (Ti 3:3).

“With better herbs shall they eat it” (Exo 12:8). The reference is to the paschal lamb, the blood of which provided shelter from the angel of death and issued in their deliverance from their serfdom under Pharaoh. Thus, that lamb was a notable type of Christ and His glorious redemption. It is not sufficiently realized that “redemption” presupposes *bondage*, that it is the freeing of sin’s captives, the delivering of the devil’s bound prisoners (Isa 61:1; Zec 9:11). “If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (Joh 8:36). Redemption, then, is the emancipating of Satan’s serfs, by the mighty power of God, on the ground of atoning blood. Ever after, the children of Israel were annually to celebrate that deliverance from Egyptian slavery by eating a lamb with bitter herbs—the bitter herbs being designed to be a perpetual reminder of their former bitter bondage. In their spiritual application unto Christians, those bitter herbs are an emblem of that godly sorrow and mortification of the flesh which are ever to accompany the exercise of a living faith in the Lord Jesus. We cannot have real fellowship with the sufferings of Christ (Phi 3:10) except as we bring to mind what it was that made those sufferings necessary, and the recollection of our past wickedness will produce a broken heart and contrite spirit. “This will give an admirable relish to the paschal lamb: Christ will be as sweet to us as sin be bitter” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714).

“When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry” (Est 4:1). This was because the king had issued an edict that on a certain day all the Jews in his provinces were to be slain. “Public calamities, especially those which oppress the Church of God, should more affect our hearts than any private afflictions” (Thomas Scott, 1747-1821). If we be concerned for the glory of God, we cannot behold with stoical indifference the dishonour now being done to His name throughout Christendom. Moses refused to eat and drink for forty days and nights because Israel had sinned so grievously against the Lord (Deu 19:18-19). Samuel, in anticipation of the divine judgments on Saul, grieved himself, and “cried unto the LORD all night” (1Sa 15:11). On a similar occasion, Ezra was prostrated in the deepest sorrow (9:3-4). David declared, “Rivers of water run down mine eyes, because they keep not thy law” (Psa 119:136). Christ wept over Jerusalem (Luk 19:41), and in this feature, too, we are to be conformed unto Him. When rebuking wayward saints, Paul could only write to them “out of much affliction and anguish of heart” (2Co 2:4), and in speaking of others, he said, “of whom I...tell you even weeping” (Phi 3:18).

“Even to day is my complaint [not “complaining”] bitter: my stroke is heavier than my groaning” (Job 23:2). We do not at all agree with those expositors who regard Job as here referring to what they term a “divine desertion,” that the Lord had so withdrawn the light of His countenance from the patriarch that he was unable to obtain conscious access to Him. Rather do we think that Job’s distress was occasioned by his inability to understand the Lord’s dealings with him. His afflictions were so severe, so long-protracted, so inexplicably mysterious to him, that his case was well-nigh unendurable. He was at a complete loss to understand the divine providence. As he sought to forecast the future, no light was shed on his path. As he reviewed the past (verse 8), he was unable to put his finger on any

sin which had provoked God to deal so severely with him. No matter from which angle he sought to view his case (verse 9), the divine dispensations appeared to proceed neither from justice nor from grace. Such a bewildering situation is indeed bitter. If such be yours, comfort yourself with the assurance, "But he knoweth [if I do not] the way that I take: when he hath tried me, I shall come forth as gold" (verse 10).

"Who whet their tongue like a sword, and bend their bows to shoot their arrows, even bitter words" (Psa 64:3). There are some sensitive dispositions which find this experience harder to endure than bodily pains or temporal losses. While it be true that "hard words never broke any bones," yet some are cut to the very quick when sharp words are spoken against or even to them. Sly insinuations and false accusations are like arrows shot from a bow. Spiteful reproaches and evil slanders are grievous trials to many. As the viper fastened on the hand of Paul, so the venomous tongues of the wicked make the godly their mark, seeking to ruin their reputations and distress their minds. They unscrupulously invent falsehoods which are calculated to cause anguish. If such be the reader's case, let him remember the Lord Jesus—they laid grievous things to His charge which they could not prove. Vile indeed were their words against Him. They charged Him with being a glutton and a winebibber, said He was a Samaritan, imputed His miracles to diabolical influence, branded His teaching as blasphemous. But "when he was reviled, he reviled not again."

"Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee: know therefore and see that it is an evil thing and bitter, that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God" (Jer 2:19). Backsliding implies a relationship to Him, whether it be in profession or reality. Every sin committed by a Christian is not a backsliding, any more than every spot is leprosy. He may sin through ignorance, be overtaken in a fault, or find sin cleaving to him when it is loathed and resisted. Backsliding imports a willful step, though it ever begins in the heart ere it is manifested in the outward life. God no longer has His rightful place in the soul, and the creature is preferred before Him. Bitter indeed are the consequences, for he is made to reap the sour fruits of his evil sowings. "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways" (Pro 14:14). He no longer delights in the Lord or seeks His glory, but is occupied with his own wretchedness. The joy of the Lord is no longer his strength, nor does His peace rule in his heart. A coldness in prayer seizes upon him, relish of the Word is lost, a burdened conscience is now his portion. "The way of the transgressor is hard" (Pro 13:15), whether it be trod by the converted or by the unconverted—double so to the former.

"But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth" (Jam 3:14). Sad indeed is it that the Lord's own people require such an exhortation as this; yet both the history of the past and the conditions now obtaining in the churches evince the need for it. In it, we are shown the acrid fruit which issues from that extreme austerity which is contrary to "the meekness of wisdom" of the preceding verse, namely, an unreadiness to forgive one another and live at peace with all men. There may be envy without contention, yet it is usually contention which makes the envying bitter; and, as John Calvin (1509-1564) pointed out, "That prevails not except when minds are so infatuated with the poison of malignity that they turn all things into bitterness." Where there be such pride and animosity against any differing from you, boast not of it as though you were endowed with greater wisdom, wiser discernment or more zeal for the truth than others.

Glory not in your shame. "Holy zeal and bitter envyings are as different as the flames of seraphim and the fire of hell" (Henry). That which produces breaches between Christians rarely proceeds from love to God, but is generally the overflow of gall and anger.

## EXPOSITION OF JOHN'S FIRST EPISTLE

### *23. The Family Graded (2:13-14)*

*"I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father. I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one."*

All of God's regenerated people are not of the same spiritual stature. Though all of them are quickened into newness of life, made partakers of the divine nature, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, yet they vary from one another in several respects. Talents are not bestowed upon them uniformly, there are distinct stages in their growth in grace, and their actual attainments differ considerably. In the passage at which we have now arrived, the apostle divides believers into three classes: fathers, young men, and babes. But before he describes their respective characteristics he first addresses himself to the entire family under the endearing appellation of "little children," and predicates a basic blessing which pertains unto them all alike: "your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake." In our last, we dwelt upon the subject of forgiveness, but had to conclude before reaching the final clause of verse 12, which announces the ground on which God pardons the penitent believer. We shall therefore turn to it now, and consider first the force of "his"; second, explain the "for his name's sake"; and third, show how He is conjoined with the Father Himself.

Whom are we to understand by "*for his name's sake*"—God or Christ? For the praise of the glory of the grace of the former, or because of the redemption that is found in the latter? A careful reading of the whole context supplies a clear answer. In verse 1 it is Christ who is the Advocate with the Father. In verse 2 He is mentioned as our Propitiation. In verse 6 He is presented as our Exemplar. In verses 4, 7, and 8 He is viewed as our Legislator. The new commandment of verses 7 and 8 is definitely from Christ, and so too believers receive the forgiveness of sins for His sake. "Nevertheless he saved them for his name's sake" (Psa 106:8). "O LORD, though our iniquities testify against us, do thou it for thy name's sake" (Jer 14:7): it is never for the sake of any good thing found in us or done by us. "His name" is here to be taken for His person, for that was what gave infinite value to His work. Our sins are forgiven because they were atoned for by Christ, pardon being

purchased and procured by the shedding of His blood (Heb 1:3). Our sins were imputed to Christ, laid upon Him. He bore them in His own body on the tree: there He was paid their wages: the debt was discharged, and therefore they are eternally banished from the eyes of the Law.

But though the believer's sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, yet not to the exclusion of the Father. No indeed, for though Christ be mentioned in many such passages without the Father, it is never but as conjoined with Him. Our salvation is a covenant one in which the eternal Three are equally engaged and concerned. Pardon comes from God the Father, but it flows down to us through Christ the blessed Mediator,<sup>1</sup> being the effect and fruit of His mediation. When it is said that "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins," the reference is unto the Father, who is faithful to His covenant engagements and just to the claims of Christ's sacrifice. So too our glorified Saviour is an Advocate with the Father. And thus here: while the forgiveness of our sins is due immediately to the offering of Christ, being sure proof of the everlasting efficacy thereof, it is equally an evidence of God's grace and the exercise of His righteousness. "Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom" (Job 33:24); "God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph 4:32). Every spiritual blessing we receive comes to us from the Father's bounty, but through the channel of Christ's glorious and prevalent mediation. The salvation of the triune God shines forth in the person of Christ.

Divine forgiveness can be known only by faith resting on the bare word of God. Reason cannot reach unto it, and often the dictates of conscience are dead against it. Yet a knowledge thereof does not always come to the saint the hour he believes in Christ, though the fact itself does.

*"The moment a sinner believes,  
And trusts in his crucified God,  
His pardon at once he receives,  
Redemption in full through Christ's blood."*

Yet it is the bounden duty of every Christian to labour after a clear realization of the same: "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith [i.e. with a firm trust in Christ and entire dependence upon Him], having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (Heb 10:22). Here are some of the marks of a forgiven soul:

- A spirit without guile (Psa 32:2), honest with self and in our dealings with God: hence, "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity" (Eph 6:24).
- Mourning for sin and displeasing of God, "there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psa 130:4).

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<sup>1</sup> **Mediator** – a go-between; "It pleased God in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus his only begotten Son, according to the Covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and Man; the Prophet, Priest and King; Head and Savior of His Church, the heir of all things, and judge of the world: Unto whom He did from all eternity give a people to be His seed, and to be by Him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (*Second London Baptist Confession*, 8.1)

- Deliverance from the dominion of sin (Mic 7:8).
- The forgiveness of others (Mat 6:14).

*We turn now to verses 13 and 14.* In this world nothing is brought to maturity immediately: instead, everything develops by orderly progress and gradual growth—"first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear" (Mar 4:28). The child of God is no exception, for at regeneration he is not fully developed spiritually, as the first Adam was naturally; but, in conformity to his Head, he is born like the last Adam—a babe, who "increased in wisdom and stature" (Luk 2:52) until He attained to manhood. All the parts and faculties of the new man indeed come into being at the new birth, but time is needed for their increase and manifestation. The apostle here makes mention of little children, young men, and fathers, and in so doing he grades them not according to their natural ages, nor by the length of time they had been believers, but according to the progress they had made in the Christian life. John himself was well qualified to deal therewith, for in his own case he knew what it once was to be a babe in Christ. Later, he had also known what it was, under the grace and teaching of the Spirit, to advance to the stage of being a young man in Christ. Ultimately, through the good hand of God, he had arrived at being a "father."

While it be true that the apostle does not here grade the children of God by their natural ages, but rather according to their spiritual attainments, nevertheless he describes the latter in terms which are characteristic of the former, for the different excellences ascribed to each group accord with those which are found in nature. Affection marks the regenerate infant, as it does the physical one; vigorous exploits distinguish the young men, and wisdom the fathers. Little children love to be carried in their parents' bosoms, to be dandled on their knees, to be taken by the arms as they are taught to walk; and here the spiritual babes are said to know the Father. We are told that "the glory of young men is their strength" (Pro 20:29), and the same thing is predicated of the second class in 1 John 2:14; while "with the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding" (Job 12:12)—exemplified in the case of the "fathers." Thus the several qualities assigned to the three groups harmonize with the natural properties, which pertain to those of corresponding ages.

There are real and marked differences among the people of God: not all of them are of one uniform stature, strength, or growth in godliness. Some are sheep, others are lambs, and are to be dealt with accordingly (Joh 21:15-16). Some are strong; others are weak (Rom 15:1). Some are "babes," others of "full age" (Heb 5:13-14). All are fertile, yet not all in the same measure: "and brought forth, some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundred" (Mar 4:8); similarly we read in John 15 of "fruit" (verse 2), "more fruit" (verse 2), and "much fruit" (verse 5). Yet though there be different degrees of grace, knowledge and attainments among the sons and daughters of the Lord, they are all alike dear unto Him. Then let us not despise the least degree of grace in others. There was a time when the father in Christ was but a babe, and the time may come when the babe shall grow into a father. If by grace we have been enabled to go "from strength to strength" (Psa 84:7) and "from glory to glory" (2Co 3:18) let us bless God, for we have nothing to boast of. "Who maketh thee to differ from another [not only from the unregenerate, but also from thy fee-



bler and more ignorant fellow Christians]? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1Co 4:7).

Though the distinctions made by the apostle in our text respect not their natural ages, but rather their different measures of grace, still it is to be observed that God has always had His people of all sorts and sizes. Of "little children" we may cite Samuel, who was called at a very early age (1Sa 2:18); Timothy, whom Paul reminded "from a child thou hast known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2Ti 3:15). Little children also raised their hosannahs to the Son of David (Mat 21:15-16), and He did not despise them, but defended them. Among young men, we think of Joseph, David (1Sa 17:33, 37), and Josiah, who "while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father" (2Ch 34:3). Among the "fathers" we read of "Mnason of Cyprus, an old disciple" (Act 21:16), and of "Paul the aged" (Phi 9). And thus it is still: some are plucked as brands from the burning while of tender years, others in the vigour of youth, and others when nearing the close of life. Here too God displays the sovereignty of His grace.

It requires to be pointed out that all babes in Christ do not grow up into spiritual young men, nor do all Christian young men attain the status of fathers. In some instances they are taken home soon after their conversion, but in the majority of cases their development is checked through failing to make a proper use of the means of grace, and hindered by a number of other things. There are many who make a promising start, but later their zeal abates, they backslide, and become a grief to their brethren. To the Corinthians Paul had to say, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ" (1Co 3:1); while to the Hebrews he complained, "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat" (5:12). On the other hand, there are those who progress steadily and make such proficiency in the school of Christ that, long before their heads are hoary, they can say with David, "I understand more than the ancients, because I keep thy precepts" (Psa 119:100).

That the believer ought to make constant advance in the Christian life is obvious, for we are expressly exhorted to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2Pe 3:18). To the Ephesians Paul wrote, "That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine...but speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (4:14-15); and to the Corinthians, "Brethren, be not children in understanding; howbeit in malice be ye children; but in understanding be men" (1Co 14:20). Nevertheless, the fact remains that it is with individual Christians as it was (and still is) with corporate companies of the saints. To those at Rome Paul could say, "your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (1:8), but of the Galatians he had to say, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you?" (5:7). To the Thessalonians he declared, "your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth" (2Th 1:3); whereas of the Ephesians it is recorded, "thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works" (Rev 2:4-5).

In many instances growth in grace is far from corresponding with the increase of age. There are many professing Christians, and not a few real ones too, who are old in years and of long standing in the Church, yet are they but little children in knowledge and experience: they neither attain unto an apprehension of the deeper things of God, nor are they competent to counsel those who are much younger than themselves. How often we behold a verification of those words of Job 32:9: "Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment." How few really spiritual Christians there are, qualified to restore a brother who has been overtaken in a fault (Gal 6:1). Mortified young believers are far more spiritual than older ones who indulge their fleshly appetites and inordinately seek the things of this world. The youthful Elihu used milder language and better arguments when reasoning with the afflicted patriarch than did the three friends who were greatly his seniors. Gracious abilities come not from age, but from the Spirit. Those whose thoughts are formed and whose ways are regulated by the Word of truth are wiser than they who confer much with flesh and blood.

While the differences between the three classes in the school of Christ are more or less clearly marked (probably much more so in the apostle's day than in ours), yet we need to be upon our guard against so partitioning off believers in our mind that we attribute all the knowledge to the fathers, or all the strength to the young men. That would be contrary to Scripture and experience alike: as the fathers have strength, so the young men possess knowledge, though not to the same extent. So too if the young men in Christ overcome the wicked one, so do the babes in their measure and degree—and the fathers also. It is also to be borne in mind that Christian experience is not always uniform or unvarying even in the same individual. The mature saint may in some respects be as weak as the most recent convert, and in certain regards be tempted as fiercely as the young men. In general, we may say that God so orders His providences with the different members of His family that each of them is given opportunity to exercise and make manifest these Christian characteristics in due course, so that in their season those graces shine forth with greater clearness.

It will be noted that the apostle addresses the several classes according to the order of their dignity and responsibility; whereas in Ephesians 5 and 6 it is the order of grace, for in each instance of the reciprocal relations it is the inferior party who is first exhorted, the wives before the husbands, children before their fathers, and servants before their masters. To notice first the weaker vessel, or the one occupying the lower place, is according to that wondrous grace which led the Lord of glory to take upon Him the form of a servant. Nothing in the Scriptures is without significance and importance, for they are the Word of Him who is a God of order. A further example of what we are here calling attention to is found in the contrast presented between the parable of the labourers (Mat 20) and that of the talents (Mat 25:14-30). In the former, where the Lord was acting in sovereign grace (verse 15), He began by rewarding the one who had done the least, who had wrought only one hour; but in the latter, where responsibility was in view, the one who had received the five talents was dealt with before those who had received only two and one.

In accord with the different grades of intelligence and attainments among His people, the Lord graciously calls a variety of servants, whom He equips to minister unto them. The ministers of Christ are not all of the same spiritual stature, nor are they alike qualified to be of most help to the several classes in Christ's school. Thus we are told that "He gave some

apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11-12). The first two of those offices have become obsolete, but the last three mentioned still obtain, and they correspond closely with the three groups mentioned in our text: the evangelist being best suited to the babes in Christ, the pastor to the young men, and the teacher to the fathers, who are capable of receiving profounder instruction than either of the others. Our Lord Himself, the perfect Servant, was divinely fitted for and actually discharged all three functions, for not only did He go about evangelizing, but He went forth to "teach and preach in their cities" (Mat 11:1, and cf. 4:23); as did also the most gifted one of His ambassadors—thus the two things are quite distinct.

There are many who mistakenly suppose that all God-sent preachers are the same. In one sense they are, all being commissioned by Him and clothed with His authority; but they are not alike furnished to meet the peculiar needs of the several classes of the saints. There are ministerial "young men" and "fathers," as well as among the rank and file of believers. Since there are always far more spiritual babes than fathers in the churches, the Lord appoints a greater number of His servants to minister "the milk of the word" unto those, and endows fewer of them with the ability to give forth "strong meat." As Paul informed the Corinthians, "But we will not boast of things without our measure, but according to the measure of the rule which God hath distributed to us, a measure to reach even unto you" (2Co 10:13). His traducers were accusing him of egotism and blaming him for ranking himself with such wise and eminent men as they deemed themselves to be. He refuted their charge, insisting that he had not gone beyond either the capacity or the territory which God had assigned him. The "rule" is the determiner of both the gifts and the sphere of each servant of God, and the "which God hath distributed" shows that He bestows them in varying measures.

Still more to the point was his statement in the first Corinthian epistle, "For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers" (4:15). Upon which S.E. Pierce (1746-1829) said: "None ever respected such as the Lord sent more than did Paul; yet he did not think alike of all them as it respected their station, qualities, and usefulness to the souls of men. Some of them were in instructors in Christ, and they could go no further: the Lord Himself had neither fitted nor designed them for anything beyond this. It was a great honour conferred upon them to be such; yet they should be content and not exalt themselves above their brethren by thinking they were the only ministers who are useful in the Church of Christ. Most assuredly fathers in Christ are superior to them, and their usefulness must be of more service and importance. As amongst such are real saints the Lord will have the threefold division kept up, of fathers, young men, and babes in Christ, so He will have ministers suited to each of these. And whilst they shall all be useful in their respective situations, yet they cannot be so in the same way. The ministerial fathers will ever be distinguished from others. Their use will be of another kind from that of the brother who is to encourage the young men in Christ, and quite distinct again from those who feed the babes." As there are always many fewer fathers among the saints, so far fewer men capable of ministering to them.

The links between what is said in verse 12 to be the common portion of all the believing children of God and what is predicated of them in verses 13 and 14, where they are di-

vided into three classes, are more or less apparent. First, "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning"; however lengthy or full be their acquaintance with Christ, their experiential knowledge of Him began by proving the sufficiency of His atoning blood to cleanse them from all the guilt of sin. Second, "I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one:" such victory was not possible unless there was the assurance of sins forgiven, for, as Revelation 12:11, declares: "they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb": that is by faith in that blood. Third, "I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father:" but such a privilege and blessing cannot be apart from the Saviour, for, as He said, "no one cometh unto the Father, but by me" (Joh 14:6). It is blessed to see that the sins of the weakest babe are as truly forgiven him as are those of the maturest father. It is also to be noted that the forgiveness of sins is accompanied not only by the knowledge of the Father, but by conflict with the wicked one too.

## THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JOSHUA

### *75. The Levites (13:14), Part 1*

We have now completed our examination of the first two main divisions of the book of Joshua, which treat of Israel's supernatural entrance into the land of Canaan and (under the sword of the Lord) their conquest and occupation thereof. Before turning to the next section, which describes the apportioning of Israel's inheritance among the tribes, we feel it advisable to notice a statement which occurs several times in our present book, namely, that "unto the tribe of Levi he gave none inheritance" (13:14 and see 13:33; 14:3). Such repetition is the more noteworthy since the same thing, substantially, is found again in Numbers 18:20-23; 26:62; Deuteronomy 10:9; 12:12; 14:27-29; 18:1-2; Ezekiel 44:28. Thus, this tribal peculiarity is mentioned no less than twelve times. Such frequency implies something of considerable importance, and therefore is worthy of our careful attention. While a full consideration of the subject will require us to turn unto a number of passages outside the book of Joshua, yet we make no apology for what some may regard as a digression, for, judging from our conversations with professing Christians generally, there seems to be as real a need to write an article on the Levites as there was upon Caleb, and it is only by comparing the principal references thereto that we can obtain a complete picture of them.

The first reference to Levi is the brief account which is given of his birth, "And she [Leah] conceived again, and bare a son; and said, Now this time will my husband be joined unto me, because I have borne him three sons: therefore was his name called Levi"—*joined* (Gen 29:34). As we pointed out many years ago, the meanings of the names of Jacob's sons most strikingly foreshadowed the early history of national Israel, and, we may add, of spiritual Israel too. Her first-born Leah called Reuben, saying: "Surely the LORD hath *looked* upon my affliction"; and her second, Simeon, giving as the reason, "Because

the LORD hath *heard* that I was hated” (Gen 29:32-33). The parallel between those utterances and the suffering of Israel in Egypt is apparent. First, we read that “God *looked* upon the children of Israel.” Then He said, “I have surely seen the *affliction* of my people which are in Egypt”; and then, exactly corresponding with Leah’s words when Simeon was born, and “have *heard* their cry” (Exo 2:25; 3:7). In choosing such language on that occasion, God surely had in mind the words which Leah used (under prophetic impulse) long before. Such too are the beginnings of the experiential history of spiritual Israelites—under conviction of sin and a feeling sense of their lost condition, they are sorely afflicted, and the Lord looks compassionately upon them and hears their cry.

In like manner, the words of Levi’s mother at the time of his birth—“My husband will be joined unto me”—looked forward to the beginning of the Hebrews’ national history. When was it that JEHOVAH was “joined to” Israel and became their “husband”? It was just after their deliverance from the house of bondage on the night of the Passover, when the lamb was slain and its blood sprinkled—just as God is joined to the repenting and believing sinner and becomes one with him in Christ. It is in the Lamb slain, now glorified, that God and the redeemed meet together. That was the “time” when JEHOVAH entered into a covenant with the chosen nation and became their Husband. Observe well how that very word is used in Jeremiah 31:31-32, and that what is there said looks back to the Passover night, “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an *husband* unto them.”

Turning back to the historical and literal, the second mention of Levi is in Genesis 34:25-26. “And it came to pass on the third day, when they were sore, that two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah’s brethren, took each man his sword, and came upon the city boldly, and slew all the males.” There we see what Levi was by nature—thoroughly unscrupulous, savage, void of pity, merciless. Joining with his brother Simeon, Levi took treacherous advantage of the partly incapacitated Shechemites and, while they were physically handicapped, fell upon and brutally butchered all their males. Few deeds more dastardly than theirs are recorded in God’s Word. It provides a solemn and graphic picture of what fallen man is by nature—totally depraved, without love either to God or to his neighbour; self-willed, ferocious, with feet that are “swift to shed blood” (Rom 3:15). What made the crime much worse was that they made a holy ordinance of God subordinate to their wicked design (verses 13-17), and thereby not only shamed themselves and their family, but also brought reproach upon that honourable badge of their religion.

It was to that horrible offence that Jacob had reference when, in his prophetic forecast of the future of his sons and their descendants, he said, “Simeon and Levi are brethren; instruments of cruelty are in their habitations. O my soul, come not thou into their secret; unto their assembly, mine honour, be not thou united... *Cursed* be their anger, for it was fierce; and their wrath, for it was cruel: I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel” (Gen 49:5-7). In passing, let it be pointed out that those verses supply a striking proof of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, for had not Moses been moved by the Holy Spirit, he surely had left out that part of the patriarch’s prediction, seeing that Moses himself was a descendant of Levi! After denouncing their atrocious crime, that which is most

prominent in Jacob's prophecy was that those two tribes were to be divided and scattered in Israel. Literally was that fulfilled, for the Simeonites received no separate territory in Canaan, but obtained their portion within the allotment of Judah (Jos 19:1-8), and were dispersed among their cities. While the Levites were given the use of forty-eight cities, which were scattered throughout the inheritance of the other tribes (Num 35:8; Jos 14:4).

But now we turn to the brighter side of the picture, and look upon some of the blessed fruits which divine grace produces in the most unpromising soils. In Exodus 32, Levi is seen to advantage under the most doleful circumstances. As Moses witnessed the frenzied Israelites worshipping the golden calf, he cried, "Who is on the LORD'S side?" And we are told that "all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him." Severely were they now tested, for Moses declared unto them, "Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, and go in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour." What a dreadful ordeal was that! One which cut right across natural inclinations and sentiments. Yet nobly did they respond to the exacting call, "And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses, and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. For Moses had said, Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD, even every man upon his son, and upon his brother; that he may bestow upon you a blessing this day" (verses 26-29).

That was the day of *Levi's conversion*, for his response to "Who is on the LORD'S side?" and "Consecrate yourselves today to the LORD" demonstrated the great and grand change which had taken place in his heart. The children of Levi were obedient to the divine call at all costs, crucifying, as it were, the flesh, with its affections and lusts. The claims of JEHOVAH's honour and the purity of His worship overriding all other considerations, so that they entirely subordinated their own feelings thereto. How different was the use made of Levi's sword on this occasion from that which is recorded in Genesis 34! How radically unlike were the motives which actuated him then and now! A greater contrast could scarcely be imagined. There his sword was drawn against those who were friendly disposed. Here, against the open enemies of JEHOVAH. There, he was acting in the energy of the flesh, moved by carnal anger and base treachery. Here, he wrought in the power of the Spirit, in holy jealousy and concern for the glory of the Lord. There, he was joined with bloodthirsty Simeon in committing murder. Here, he was joined with Moses in executing righteous judgment upon idolators.

Moses had said, "Consecrate yourselves to day to the LORD...that he may bestow a blessing," and fully was that word made good. Richly were they rewarded for their self-denying fidelity. In Deuteronomy 33:8-11, we are informed that Moses said of Levi, "Let thy Thummim and thy Urim be with thy holy one...who said unto his father and to his mother [by his actions], I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his [guilty] brethren, nor knew [spared] his own children: for they have observed thy word, and kept thy covenant. They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law: they shall put incense before thee, and whole burnt sacrifice upon thine altar. *Bless*, LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands." It was because they ignored natural ties, knowing no man after the flesh, and forebore dealing tenderly with their own kith and kin when it came to maintaining the honour of God, that these high favours were bestowed upon them. It was

because the spirit triumphed over the flesh, so that they observed God's word and covenant, that there were committed unto them the Thummim and Urim, the gift of teaching and the privilege of ministering before the Lord. Thus did God honour those who honoured Him; and thus He still does.

Beautiful is it to see, also, how that Levi's devotion unto the Lord in acting for Him revoked Jacob's curse in Genesis 49:7, and secured the divine blessing (Exo 32:29; Deu 33:11). It is further to be noted that, at a later date, a member of the tribe of Levi, Phinehas (the grandson of Aaron) was equally jealous for the honour of his Master, acting in unsparing judgment upon transgressors when the occasion demanded it. Though the flagrant offenders were of princely stock, Phinehas had no respect of persons, but, fired with holy indignation, spared them not, and, by so doing, he turned away the wrath of the Lord from Israel. In return thereof, JEHOVAH said, "Behold, I give unto him my covenant of peace: and he shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood: because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the children of Israel" (Num 25:6-13). His deed was so pleasing unto God, and the motives which actuated him were so pure in His sight, that He gave to him the covenant of an everlasting priesthood. Thus the descendants of the one who was joined with Simeon in cruelty were joined to the Lord in grace. Notice is taken of this both in Psalm 106:29-31 and in Malachi 2:5.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may minister unto him" (Num 3:5-6). Here we behold a most illustrious display of the amazing and sovereign *grace of God*, as much so as in the case of the conversion and calling of Saul of Tarsus. Saul was "a blasphemer, and persecutor, and injurious," nevertheless the Lord declared, "He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles" (Act 9:15); and as he himself affirmed, "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a *pattern* to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (1Ti 1:16). And the divine favour was no less signally exhibited in the calling of Levi and the signal honours bestowed upon him. It was an unmistakable demonstration of God's sovereignty that, out of all the tribes of Israel, Levi should be chosen for the place of special nearness to Himself; as it was also a most blessed manifestation of the riches of God's grace which were lavished upon him.

As we have seen, Levi was by nature and conduct far from God, and His holy abhorrence of his moral evil was clearly expressed through the lips of his father. Two things are to be observed regarding the contents of Genesis 49. First, that those utterances of dying Jacob were very much more than the language of a mere man, namely, expressions of the mind of God—though of Jacob also, as being through grace in sympathy with Him. Thus, the language of Genesis 49:5-7 shows that Levi, naturally, was an object of abhorrence to God. Second, according to the principles of Bible teaching, God's estimate of a man's nature is also His estimate of his descendants. Those principles are "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," and that of headship and representation. Accordingly, Jacob's prophecy contemplated his sons not simply as individuals, but as tribal heads, so that what was said of each one is essentially true of his tribe.

Now it was of this Levi who was, as to his moral condition, in the “far country,” that the divine edict went forth, “Bring the tribe of Levi *near*” (Num 3:5). Thus, even while “far off” he was ordained to be “a chosen vessel unto the LORD.” Let us pause now and make application of this blessed type unto ourselves. That can best be done by asking, What and where *were* we? What and where *are* we? The Bible furnishes definite answers. On the one hand, our moral distance from God, our nature and practice when we were children of wrath, and, on the other hand, our regeneration and reconciliation through the blood of Christ, have both been depicted and declared by the Holy Spirit. Our original condition is described in such passages as Romans 3:10-18; Ephesians 2:1-3; Titus 3:3. There is our portrait drawn by the divine hand, and it is exceeding like that of Levi. We were “alienated and enemies in our minds by wicked works” (Col 1:21), “living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Ti 3:3). Such were writer and Christian reader before divine grace laid hold of us—capable of the most atrocious crimes, the seeds of all iniquity within our hearts.

Such we *were*. But *now*, being justified by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, we “who sometimes were far off are *made nigh* by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). We who were guilty are now “justified from *all things*” (Act 13:39). We who were polluted are now “washed and sanctified” (1Co 6:11). We who were “cursed children” (2Pe 2:14), condemned by the Law, are now “dear children” (Eph 5:1), blessed “with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph 1:3). Formerly “having no hope, and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12), but now given free access unto Him. And more than all of this, “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us...hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4-6)—such being our exalted status and position before God in the person of our Head. Brought nigh to Him by atoning blood that we might be presented “holy and unblameable and unproveable in his sight” (Col 1:22). Such *was* our infinite distance and degradation; such *is* the wondrous nearness and exaltation to which we are brought.

And *how do you esteem* your position, fellow believer? Does your heart rejoice in your oneness with Christ, and your perfect cleansing and acceptance in Him? Are you acting in the assurance of being “made nigh” to God? Or is it in your estimate presumption to exercise your privilege with all boldness? As surely as the early history of Levi portrayed ours, so does the “Bring the tribe of Levi near” of Numbers 3:5 find its antitypical fulfilment in the “brought nigh” of Ephesians 2:13. Since Paul is our “pattern” (1Ti 1:16), let us not only be encouraged by it to come unto Christ as lost sinners, but also emulate the holy boldness of his simple faith, knowing that “being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand” (Rom 5:1-2).



## THE DOCTRINE OF HUMAN DEPRAVITY

### 9. *Its Ramifications, Part 2*

That hardness of heart to which reference was made at the close of our last, is the perverseness and obstinacy of fallen man's nature, which makes him resolve to continue in sin no matter what be the consequences thereof. It renders him unwilling to be rebuked for his folly, and makes him refuse to be reclaimed from it, whatever methods are used in order thereunto. The prophet made mention of this in his day, for referring to those who had been forewarned by sore judgments, and were at that very time under the most solemn rebukes of Providence, God had to say of them, "They will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted" (Eze 3:7). So too the Lord Jesus complained, "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced: we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented" (Mat 11:17). The most pathetic entreaties and winsome exhortations will not move the unregenerate to close with what is absolutely necessary for their present peace and final felicity. "They are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear; which will not hearken to the voice of charmers, charming never so wisely" (Psa 58:4-5 and cf. Act 7:57).

The hearts of the regenerate are ductile and pliable, easily bent to God's will, but the hearts of the wicked are so wedded to their lusts as to be impervious to all appeal. There is such an unyielding disposition against heavenly things that they respond not to the most alarming threatenings and thunderings. They will neither be convinced by the most cogent arguments nor won by the most tempting inducements. They are so addicted to self-pleasing that they cannot be persuaded to take Christ's yoke upon them. In Zechariah 7:11-12, it is said, "But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear. Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the law, and the words which the LORD of hosts hath sent." They are less susceptible to be wrought upon by the preacher to receive any impressions of holiness than granite is to be engraved by the tool of the artificer. They scorn to be controlled and refuse to be admonished. They are "a stubborn and rebellious generation" (Psa 78:8), being subject to neither the Law nor the Gospel. The doctrines of repentance, denying of self, walking with God, can find no entrance into their hearts.

3. *Disordered affections.* Some writers take in more and others less in the scope of the term "affections," and perhaps it is a moot point both theologically and psychologically whether the desire nature is to be included therein or to be considered separately. In the broadest meaning, the affections may be said to be the sensitive faculty of the soul. As the understanding is that power which discerns and judges things, so the affections allure and dispose the soul unto or against the objects contemplated. It is by the affections that the soul becomes pleased or displeased with what is cognized by the bodily senses or contemplated by the mind, and thus moved to approve or reject. As distinguished from both, the

*will* is that faculty which executes the final decision of the mind or the strongest desire of the affections, carrying out the same into action. Since the affections pertain to the sensitive side of the soul, we are more conscious of *their stirrings* than we are of the actings of our minds or wills. In this article, we shall employ the term in its widest latitude, including the desires, for what the appetites are to the body the affections are to the soul.

Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680) likened the desire nature unto the stomach in the body. It is an empty void, fitted to receive from without, longing for a satisfying object. Its universal language is, "Who will show us any good?" (Psa 4:6). Now God Himself is man's chief good, the only One who can afford him real, lasting, and full satisfaction. At the beginning, He created him in His own likeness; that as the needle touched by the landstone ever moves northward, so the soul being touched with the divine image should carry the understanding, affections, and will unto Himself. He also placed the soul in a material body, and that in this world, fitting each for the other, providing everything necessary for and suited to each part of man's complex being. The desire nature carried the soul unto the creature, but only as a means of enjoying God in and by them. The wonders of God's handiwork were meant to be admired, but chiefly as displaying His wisdom. Food was to be eaten and enjoyed, but in order to deepen gratitude unto the goodness of the Giver and to supply strength to serve Him. But alas, when man apostatized, his understanding, affections, and will were divorced from God, and the exercise of them became directed only by self-love.

Originally the Lord sustained and directed the action of human affections unto Himself. Then He withheld that power, and left our first parents on their own creature footing, and, in consequence, their desires wandered after forbidden joys. They sought their happiness not in communion with their Maker, but in intercourse with the creature. Like their children ever since, they loved and served the creature more than the Creator. The result was disastrous to the last degree—they became separated from the Holy One. That was at once evidenced by their attempt to hide from Him. Had their delight been in God as their chief good, the desire for concealment could not have possessed their minds. And as it was with Adam and Eve, so it has been with all their descendants. Many a proverb expresses that general truth. "The stream cannot rise higher than the fountain." "Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles." "Like begets like." The parent stock of the human family must send forth scions of its own nature. "Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways" (Job 21:14) is what the hearts and lives of all the unregenerate say unto the Almighty.

The natural centre of unfallen man's soul, both for its rest and delight, was the One who gave him being, and therefore did David say, "Return unto thy rest, O my soul" (Psa 116:7). But sin has caused men to "draw back" from Him, and to "depart from the living God" (Heb 10:38; 3:12). God was not only to be the delightful portion of the one whom He had made in His image, but also the ultimate end of all his motions and actions, aiming to glorify and please Him in all things. But he forsook "the fountain of living waters" (Jer 2:13)—the infinite and perpetual spring of comfort and joy. And now the inclinations and lustings of man's nature are wholly taken off from God, anything and everything being more agreeable to him than He who is the sum of all excellency. Making the things of time and sense his chief good, and the pleasing of himself his supreme end. That is why their

affections are termed “ungodly lusts” (Jude 1:18)—they are all turned *away from Him*. They have no relish for His holiness, no desire for fellowship with Him, no wish to retain Him in their thoughts.

But what has just been pointed out (the aversion of our affections from God) is only the privative part. The positive is their conversion to other things. Thus it was that God charged Israel, “My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water”—betaking themselves to poor trifles which afford them no satisfaction. The creature is preferred before the Creator, for all the concern of the natural man is how to live at ease in the world, and not to honour and enjoy God. Thus do they observe “lying vanities” and “forsake their own mercy” (Jon 2:8), for as to their emptiness they are vanities, and in regard to disappointing their expectations, “lying vanities.” They are deceived by a vain show, and the outcome is vexation of spirit, because of a frustrating of their hopes. As the love of God shed abroad in the hearts of the redeemed seeks not its own (1Co 13:5), so self-love does nothing else but that very thing, “They all look to their own way, every one for his gain” (Isa 56:11).

Not only are the lusts of the unregenerate carried away from God to the creature, but they are so greedily, excessively. Thus, we read of “inordinate affections” (Col 3:5), which signifies both immoderate and irregular, both a spirit of gluttony and a craving after things which are contrary to God—“lusting after evil things” (1Co 10:6). The former is the sin of intemperance, the latter having “pleasure in unrighteousness” (2Th 2:12). The body is esteemed above the soul, for all the efforts of the natural man are directed to making provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof, while his immortal spirit is little thought of and still less cared for. When providence smiles upon his labours, his language is, “Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry” (Luk 12:19). Their thoughts rise not to a higher and future life. They are far more concerned with the clothing and adorning of the outward man than with the cultivation of a meek and quiet spirit, which in the sight of God is of great price (1Pe 3:4). Earth is preferred before heaven, things of time before eternity. Though death and the grave may put an end to all they had here much sooner than they imagine, yet their hearts are so set upon those things as their happiness that they will not be diverted from them.

Thus, it is that the affections, which at the beginning were the servants of reason, now occupy the throne. That which is the glory of human nature—elevating it above the beasts of the field—is turned hither and thither by the rude rabble of our passions. God placed in man an instinct of happiness, to find the same in Himself, but now it creeps in the dust and pours itself out to every vanity. The counsels and contrivances of the mind are engaged in the accomplishment of man’s carnal desires. Not only have his affections no relish for spiritual things, they are strongly prejudiced against them, for they run directly counter to the gratifying of his corrupt nature. His desires are set upon more wealth, more worldly honour and power, more fleshly merriment, and because the Gospel contains no promise of such things, it is despised. Because it inculcates holiness, the mortifying of the flesh, separation from the world, resisting the devil, the Gospel is most unwelcome to him. To turn the affections away from those material and temporal things which they have made their chief good, and to turn them unto unseen spiritual and eternal things, alienates the carnal mind

against the Gospel, for it offers nothing attractive to the natural man in the place of those idols on which his heart centres. To renounce his own righteousness and be dependent upon that of Another is equally distasteful to his pride.

Not only are the affections alienated from and opposed to the holy *requirements* of the Gospel, but equally so unto its *mystery*. That mystery is what the Scriptures term the hidden wisdom of God, and the natural man not only fails to admire and adore, but regards it with contempt and contumacy. He looks upon all the parts of its declaration as empty and unintelligible notions. This prejudice has prevailed over the wise and learned of this world in all ages, and in none more effectually than in our evil day. The highest wisdom of God seems foolishness unto all who are puffed up by pride in their own intelligence, and what is foolishness unto them is despised and scorned. That which is addressed to faith rather than reason is unpalatable. To lean not unto their own understanding, but trust in the Lord with all their hearts (Pro 3:5), is a "hard saying" to those considered of towering intellect. To set aside their own ideas, forsake their thoughts (Isa 55:7) and become as "little children," and be told they shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven unless they do so (Mat 18:3), is most abhorrent unto them. No small part of man's depravity consists in its readiness to embrace those prejudices, to adhere pertinaciously unto them, with total lack of power to extricate themselves from them.

The disordered state of our affections is seen in the fact that the actions of the natural man are regulated far more by his senses than by his reason. His conduct consists principally in responding to the clamouring of his lusts rather than to the dictates of reason. The desires of children are swift to any corrupting diversion, but slow to any improving exercise. From the one, they can scarcely be restrained, unto the other, they have to be compelled. That the affections are turned away from God is made manifest every time His will crosses our desires. This disease appears too in the objects on which the several affections are placed. Instead of love being set upon God, it is centred on the world, and dotes upon idols. Instead of hatred being directed against sin, it is opposed to holiness. Instead of joy finding its delight in spiritual things, it wastes itself on those which soon pall. Instead of fear being actuated by displeasing the Lord, it dreads more the frowns of our fellows. If there be grief, it is for the thwarting of our pleasures and hopes, rather than because of our waywardness. If there be pity, it is exercised upon self, rather than upon the sufferings of others.

It now remains for us to point out that the very first stirring of our lusts is itself *evil*. The passions or lusts are those natural and unrestrained motions of the creature unto the advancement of its nature, by an inclination unto those objects which promote its good, and an aversion from those which are noxious. And thus they are to the soul what wings are to the bird and sails are to the ship. Desire is ever in pursuit of satisfaction, and if it is to be met, must be regulated by right reason. But, alas, reason has been dethroned and man's passions and inclinations are lawless, and therefore their earliest risings after forbidden objects essentially evil. This was, as Matthew 5 shows, denied by the rabbins, who restricted sin to an open and outward transgression. But our Lord declared that unwarrantable anger against another was incipient murder, and that to look upon a woman so as to lust after her was a breach of the seventh commandment, that impure thoughts and wanton imaginations were nothing less than adultery (Mat 5:22, 28). Hence it is that Scrip-

ture speaks of “deceitful lusts” (Eph 4:22), “foolish and hurtful lusts” (1Ti 6:9), “worldly lusts” (Ti 2:12), “fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1Pe 2:11), “ungodly lusts” (Jude 1:18).

The very first stirring of desire after anything evil, the slightest irregularity in the motions of the soul, is *sin*. This is clear from the universal command “Thou shalt not covet,” or hanker after anything which God has prohibited. This irregular and evil longing is termed “concupiscence” in Romans 7:8, “by which the apostle included mental as well as sensual desire” (John Calvin). The Greek word is usually rendered “lust”. In 1 Thessalonians 4:5, it is found in an intensified form, “the lust of concupiscence.” These lustings of the soul are its initial motions, often unsuspected by ourselves, which precede the consent of the mind, and are designated “evil concupiscence” (Col 3:5). They are the seeds from which spring our evil works, the original stirrings of our indwelling corruption. They are condemned by the law of God, for the tenth commandment forbids the first outgoings of the affections after what belongs to another, so that the incipient longing, *before* the approbation of the mind be obtained, is sinful, and needs to be confessed unto God. Genesis 6:5 declares of fallen man that “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart” is evil, for sins while in their embryonic stage defile the soul, being contrary to that purity which the holiness of God requires.

What has been pointed out above is repudiated by Romanists, for while they allow that the lusts of the flesh are the matter of sin or that in which sin originates, they will not admit the same to be essentially evil. The Council of Trent denied that the original movement of the soul tending to evil is itself sinful, stating that it only becomes so when the same is consented or yielded to. In like manner, the majority of Arminians (who in so many of their beliefs are one with papists) confine sin to an act of the will. Now, it is freely confessed by all sound Calvinists that the mind’s entertaining of the first evil desire is a further degree of sin, and that actual assenting thereto is yet more heinous; but they emphatically contend that *the original impulse* is also evil in the sight of God. If the original impulse be innocent (*per se*), how could its gratification be sinful? Motives and excitements do not undergo any change in their essential nature in consequence of their being humoured or encouraged. It cannot be wrong to heed innocent impulses. The Lord Jesus teaches us to judge the tree by its fruits; if the fruit be corrupt, so too is the tree which bears it (Mat 7:16-20).

In Romans 7:7, the term is actually rendered sin, “I had not known *sin*, but by the law: for I had not known *lust*, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet”—or “lust,” for the Greek uses the same word. Here, then, sin and lust are used interchangeably—any inward nonconformity to the Law being sinful, Paul was made aware of that fact when the commandment was applied to him in power—as the sun shining on a dung-heap draws forth its stench. Men may deny that the very *desire after* forbidden objects is culpable, but Scripture affirms that even imaginations are evil or the buds of wickedness, for they are contrary to that rectitude of heart which the Law requires. Note how that terrible list of things which Christ enumerated as issuing from the heart of fallen man is headed with “evil thoughts” (Mat 15:19). We cannot conceive of any inclination or proneness unto sin in an absolutely holy being. Certainly there was none in the Lord Jesus, “The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me” (Joh 14:30)—nothing that was capable of responding to his vile

solicitations, no movement of His appetites or affections of which he could take advantage. Christ was inclined only unto what is good.

“For when we were in the flesh [i.e. while Christians were in their unregenerate state], the motions of sins [literally, the affections of sin, or the beginnings of our passions], which were [aggravated] by the law, did work in our members [the faculties of the soul as well as of the body] to bring forth fruit unto death” (Rom 7:5). Those “affections of sin” are the filthy streams which issue from the polluted fountain of our hearts. They are the first stirrings of our fallen nature, which precede the overt acts of transgression. They are the unlawful movements of our lusts prior to the studied and deliberate thoughts of the mind after sin. “But sin [indwelling corruption], taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence” or “evil lustings” (Rom 7:8). Note well that word “*wrought* in me”. There was a polluted disposition or evil propensity at work, distinct from and the spring of the deeds which it produced. Indwelling sin is a powerful principle, constantly exercising a bad influence, stimulating unholy affections, stirring unto avarice, enmity, malice, etc.

## INTERPRETATION OF THE SCRIPTURES

### *Part 16*

Lack of space prevented us from uttering a few words of caution at the close of our last. There are certain types of mind, particularly the mystical and fanatical, which are prone to substitute fanciful concepts for spiritual interpretations. God’s Word requires to be handled with reverential fear, and with much prayer for discernment and guidance, lest we tread on holy ground with the shoes of carnal wisdom; or the novice, striving after originality, give rein to his imagination, instead of disciplining himself to adhere strictly to the Analogy of Faith. Every preacher needs to be constantly on his guard against substituting human ingenuity for the teaching of the Spirit. Satan has ever mimicked the operations of the Spirit, and counterfeited a spiritual opening up of the Scriptures by wild perversions thereof. An early instance of this is the *Kabbala*, which, though of great esteem among the Jews, abounds in the most absurd explanations of Holy Writ. The rash allegorizing of Origen is another example to be studiously avoided, for he twisted the plainest and simplest texts into the most grotesque shapes or meanings. The strange system of exegesis adopted by Swedenborg is yet another case in point. The imagination needs to be bridled by both a tender conscience and the spirit of a sound mind.

Just so far as we really value a spiritual interpretation of God’s Word will we abominate all counterfeits. Two extremes are to be guarded against, both by those who advance and those who receive some new explanation of a passage—a love of the fantastic and a prejudice against what is novel. There is a middle ground between hastily condemning or accepting, namely, to weigh carefully and prayerfully what is presented, testing it by other passages and by our own experience. Doubtless most of us can recall some interpretations

which were new, and which at first struck us as being “far-fetched,” but which we now regard as sound and helpful. If the Holy Spirit had not informed us that Abraham’s two wives were figures of the two covenants (Gal 4:24), and that the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:11-14 were to be understood spiritually of the righteousness of faith (Rom 10:6-9), we had considered such interpretations ridiculous. Remember that God grants light to one minister which He does not to another. Even though his explanation commend not itself to you at the moment, beware of rashly calling it “a perversion of the Scriptures,” lest the same is being blessed to some poor child of God whose heart is feeding on what your head rejects.

22. *Double reference and meaning.* It is ever to be borne in mind that there is a fullness, as well as a depth, in the words of God which pertains not unto those of men, so that rarely will a single and brief definition adequately explain a scriptural term. For that reason, we must constantly be on our guard against limiting the scope of any divinely inspired statement, and saying that it means only so and so. Thus, when we are told that God made man in His own image and likeness, those words probably have a least a fourfold allusion. First, to the incarnation of the Son, for He is distinctly designated the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Second, to man’s being a tripartite creature, for “God said, Let us make man in our image” (Gen 1:26)—a trinity in unity, consisting of “spirit and soul and body” (1Th 5:23). Third, in His moral likeness, which man lost at the fall, but which is restored at regeneration (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). Fourth, to the position assigned man and the authority with which he was invested, “Let them have dominion over” (Gen 1:26). Adam was a “god” or ruler, under the Lord, of all mundane creatures.

In view of what has been pointed out, it is evident that the favourite dictum of dispensationalists—“Application is manifold, interpretation but one”—is erroneous, for the above are not four interpretations of the “image of God” from which we may choose, but the actual fourfold meaning of the term itself. To say that “Interpretation is but one” is also flatly contradicted by our Lord’s explanation of the parable of the sower, for when He defined its terms, He gave three or four different significations to the “thorns”—compare Matthew 13:22; Mark 4:18-19; Luke 8:14. We are in hearty accord with paragraph nine in the opening chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, when it says, “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly,” except that we dissent from the limitation mentioned in the parentheses. We much prefer to side with Joseph Caryl (1602-1673, one of the framers of the Westminster Confession), who, when commenting on a verse, the words of which were susceptible of various meanings, and which had been diversely explained by expositors, said, “In a Scripture which may, without the impeachment of any truth, admit divers sense, I would not be so positive in one as to reject all others.”

Even if it were true that the grammatical meaning of a verse be only one, nevertheless it may have a double reference, as is certainly the case with some of the *prophecies* in Holy Writ, which possess a major and a minor fulfilment. In his introduction to the book of Revelation, in Charles J. Ellicott’s (1819-1905) commentary, when writing upon prophecy, its annotator said, “The words of God mean more than one man or one school of thought

can compass. There are depths of truth unexplored which lie beneath the simplest sentences. Just as we are wont to say that history repeats itself, so the predictions of the Bible are not exhausted in one or even many fulfillments. Each prophecy is a single key which unlocks many doors, and the grand and stately drama of the Apocalypse has been played out perchance in one age to be repeated in the next." We greatly fear that it is nothing but narrow-minded partisanship which has caused so many to disdain such a concept, and made them reject all other interpretations which accord not with their own particular system. David said, "Thy commandment is exceeding broad" (Psa 119:96). Let us see to it that we do not contract or limit the same.

The Father's declaration concerning His Son, "By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many" (Isa 53:11) certainly has a double force—the "knowledge" He possesses and the knowledge which He imparts. As Thomas Manton (1620-1677) pointed out, "It may be taken either way: actively, for the knowledge which He shall give out; passively, for our apprehension of Christ," for the former without the latter cannot justify us. "By His knowledge" can be regarded both subjectively and objectively. First, by His own personal knowledge of the Father (Joh 17:25), which was the ground of what He imparted unto men (Joh 3:11) for their salvation. Second, for our saving knowledge of Him—received from Him. Instead of quibbling as to whether or not Isaiah intended to include each of those meanings, let us be thankful that he was guided to use language which included *both* senses. Again, our Lord's figurative expression when He declared that "the gates of hell" should not prevail against His Church" (Mat 16:19) admits of a *double* reference—death (Isa 38:10) and the powers of evil. Death and the grave *have prevailed* over every human institution, but not so over Christ (Act 2:27), or His Church (Psa 72:17; Mat 28:20), nor shall any weapon formed against her prosper (Isa 54:17)—meanings so dissimilar are no more surprising than the symbolical application of the word "lion" to Satan (1Pe 5:8) and to Christ (Rev 5:5).

"Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions" (Gal 3:19). That answer admits of two different significations. First, the immediate purpose in the Law's being formerly proclaimed and enforced subsequently to the promised inheritance to Abraham and his seed was to place a bridle upon the carnality of the Hebrews and check their sinning—by making known to them God's will and the fearful penalty of flouting His authority. Second, its ultimate design was to prepare the way for Christ, by demonstrating their need of Him because of their awful guilt. The "because of transgressions" is intentionally general enough to include both—to suppress transgressions, to make manifest transgressors. So too the next verse has a dual meaning, "Now a mediator is not a mediator of one [party], but God is one." In view of the context (verse 10 onwards, especially 16-19), "God is one" signifies, first, that *His purpose is immutable*. His design was the same in both the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants—the Law being given with a gracious end in view, to pave the way for the Saviour, hence the question and answer in verse 21. Yet in view of the whole context, it is equally clear, second, that "God is one" means that *His method of salvation* remains unaltered through all dispensations. "Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: seeing it is *one God*, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and the uncircumcision through faith" (Rom 3:29-30).



What has just been noticed leads us to point out that the terms “Israel,” “Jew,” and “seed of Abraham” all have a twofold allusion. The expression “Israel after the flesh” (1Co 10:18) is obviously a discriminating one, and would be meaningless were there no Israel after the spirit, that is regenerated Israel, “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16). The “Israel after the flesh” were the natural descendants of Abraham, whereas the spiritual Israel, whether Jews or Gentiles, are those who are born again and worship God in spirit and in truth. When the Psalmist declared, “Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart” (Psa 73:1), he certainly did not refer to the fleshly descendants of Jacob, for the greater part of them *lacked* “a clean heart”! When our Lord said of Nathanael, “Behold an Israelite *indeed*, in whom is no guile” (Joh 1:47), He obviously meant very much more than one who proceeded naturally from Jacob. His language was as distinguishing as when He said, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples *indeed*” (Joh 8:31). “An Israelite *indeed*” connoted a genuine son of the spiritual Israel, a man of faith and prayer, holy and honest. “In whom is no guile” supplies further confirmation that a saved character was there in view—compare Psalm 32:1.

When Christ said, “I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mat 15:24), He could not intend the fleshly descendants of Jacob, for, as many Scriptures plainly show (Isa 42:6; Rom 15:8-9), He was sent unto the Gentiles also. No, the “lost sheep of the house of Israel” there imported the whole election of grace. “And as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16) could not possibly refer to the nation, for God’s *wrath* was on *that*—it is on the Israel chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and regenerated by the Spirit that divine peace and mercy rest. “Not as though the word of God had taken none effect. For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rom 9:6). The Jews erroneously imagined that the promises which God had made to Abraham and his seed pertained only to his natural descendants, hence their claim, “We have Abraham to our father” (Mat 3:9). But those promises were not made to men after the flesh, but to men after the spirit, the regenerate, they alone being the “children of the promise” (Rom 9:8). God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were given to them *as believers*, and they are the spiritual property and food of believers, and none else (Rom 4:13, 16). Until that fact be grasped, we shall be all at sea with the Old Testament promises—cf. 11 Corinthians 1:20 and 7:1; 11 Peter 1:4.

“Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham” (Gal 3:7). The children of Abraham are of two kinds, physical and spiritual—those who are his by nature, and those who are connected with him by grace. “To be the children of a person in a figurative sense is equivalent to ‘resemble him and to be involved in his fate,’ good or bad. To be ‘the children of God’ is to be like God, and also, as the apostle states, it is to be ‘heirs of God.’ To be ‘the children of Abraham’ is to resemble Abraham, to imitate his conduct and to share his blessedness” (John Brown, 1722-1787). So to be “the children of the wicked one” (Mat 13:38) is to be conformed to his vile image, both in character and in conduct (Joh 8:44), and to share his doom (Mat 25:41). Christ said to the carnal Jews of His day, “If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham” (Joh 8:39). It is his spiritual children who “walk in the steps of that faith which he had” (Rom 4:12) and who are “blessed with faithful Abraham” (Gal 3:9). We must be united to Christ, who is “*the Son of Abraham*” (Mat 1:1), in order to enter into the blessings which God cove-

nanted unto the patriarch. The double significance of the expression “children” or “seed of Abraham” was plainly intimated at the beginning, when God likened his seed to the stars of the heavens and the sand which is upon the sea shore (Gen 22:17).

In like manner, the word “Jews” is applied to two very different classes of people, though few today would think so if they confined themselves to the ministry of a class who pride themselves on having more light than the majority of professing Christians. Nevertheless, such is unequivocally established by the declaration of Romans 2:28-29, “For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly: neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly: and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.” Surely nothing could be plainer than that, and in the light of such a statement, it seems passing strange that there are those—boasting loudly of their orthodoxy, and bitterly condemning all who differ from them—who insist that the term “Jew” pertains only unto the natural descendants of Jacob, and ridicule the idea that there is any such thing as a spiritual Jew. But when God tells us, “He is a Jew, which is one *inwardly*,” He manifestly means that the true “Jew,” the antitypical one, is a regenerated person, who enjoys the “praise” or approbation of God.

It is not only childish, but misleading, to affirm that “Israel” means *Israel*, and “Jew” means *Jew*, and that when God’s Word makes mention of Jerusalem or Zion nothing else is referred to than those actual places. Those who make such assertions are but deceiving themselves (and others who are gullible enough to heed them) by the mere *sound* of words. As well aver that “flesh” signifies nothing more than the physical body, that “water” (Joh 4:14) refers only to that material element, or that “death” (Joh 5:24) signifies nothing but physical dissolution. There is an end of all *interpretation*—bringing out the *sense* of Scripture—when such a foolish attitude be adopted. Each verse calls for careful and prayerful study, so that it may be fairly ascertained *which* the Spirit has in view—the carnal Israel or the spiritual, the literal seed of Abraham or the mystical, the natural Jew or the regenerate, the earthly Jerusalem or the heavenly, the typical Zion or the antitypical. God has not written His Word in such a way that the average reader is made independent of that help which He has designed to give through His accredited teachers.

We can well imagine those of our readers who have sat under the errors of dispensationalism saying, “All of this seems very confusing, for we have been taught to distinguish sharply between Israel and the Church, the one being an earthly people and the other a heavenly.” Of course Israel was an “earthly people,” so too were the Egyptians, the Babylonians, and all the other inhabitants of this world. This writer and his Christian readers are also an “earthly people,” for neither their bodies nor their souls have yet been removed to heaven. In reply, the objector will say that it was Israel’s *inheritance* which was an earthly one. But we ask, was it? Was the inheritance of the patriarchs an earthly one? Hebrews 11:14-16 plainly shows otherwise, for there we are told, “They seek a country,” that after they had entered the land of Canaan, “Now they [Abraham, Isaac and Jacob] desire a better country, that is, an heavenly.” Was the inheritance of Moses an earthly one? Let Hebrews 11:26 make answer, “Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward,” namely, the eternal one—cf. Colossians 3:24! Was David’s inheritance a mundane one? If so, how could he speak of

himself as “a stranger in the earth” (Psa 39:12; 119:119)? Psalm 73:25 shows what his heart was set upon.

It is not sufficient to affirm that Israel’s inheritance was an earthly one—*which* “Israel” must be definitely stated, and also what the inheritance adumbrated. As the portion which JEHOVAH appointed, promised, and gave unto Abraham and his descendants, that land of Canaan has, throughout this Christian era, been rightly regarded as figuring the heavenly inheritance, unto which the members of Christ are journeying as they pass through this scene of sin and trial. In order to obtain the complete typical picture of the varied spiritual experiences and exercises of God’s elect as they were so vividly foreshadowed of old, we have to take into account not only the history of the Hebrews in Egypt and their wilderness journeyings, but also what was demanded of them in order to their entrance into and occupation of the land of Canaan. As we have so frequently pointed out in our articles on the life and times of Joshua, Canaan also is to be contemplated from *two standpoints*, natural and spiritual. Spiritually, as portraying the heritage of regenerated Israelites, which heritage is to be appropriated and enjoyed now by faith and obedience, but which will not be fully entered into until the Jordan of death has been crossed. Admittedly, great care has to be taken with the Analogy of Faith.

Though Canaan was a divine gift unto the natural Israel, nevertheless their occupation thereof was the result of their own prowess. It was indeed bestowed upon them by free gift from God, yet it had to be conquered by them. Therein was accurately shadowed forth what is necessary in order to an entrance into the heavenly Canaan. The book of Joshua not only displays the sovereign grace of God, exhibits His covenant faithfulness, and the mighty power which He puts forth on behalf of His people, but it also makes known what He required from them in the discharge of their responsibility, and shows that the Lord only fought for the people while they maintained entire dependence on and were in complete subjection to Him. There were formidable obstacles to be surmounted, fierce and powerful foes to be vanquished, a hard and protracted warfare to be waged, and only while they *actively concurred* did the Lord show Himself strong on their behalf. “For *if* ye shall diligently keep all these commandments which I command you, to do them, to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to cleave unto him; Then will the LORD drive out all these nations....Every place whereon the soles of your feet shall tread shall be yours” (Deu 11:22-24). That was not the “if” of uncertainty, but had to do with their accountability—as the “if” of John 8:31, 51, Colossians 1:23 and Hebrews 3:6, 14 has with ours.

The Church’s inheritance is wholly of divine grace and mediatorial purchase, yet it is not entered into by the heirs of promise without arduous efforts on their part. There is a strait gate to be entered and a narrow way to be trodden (Mat 7:13-14). There is a race to be run which calls for temperance in all things (1Co 9:24-26). There is a fight to be fought (1Ti 6:12; 2Ti 4:7), and in order to be successful therein we have to take unto us “the whole armour of God” (Eph 6:13) and make daily use of the same. There is a ceaseless conflict with the flesh to be engaged in (Gal 5:17), a devil to be steadfastly resisted in the faith (1Pe 5:8-9), an alluring and opposing world to be overcome (Jam 4:4; 1Jo 5:4). While it is blessedly true that “we which have believed *do enter* into rest” (Heb 4:3) when Christ’s yoke is taken upon us, nevertheless, the divine injunction remains, “Let us *labour*

therefore to *enter* into that rest” (Heb 4:11) which awaits us on high, and of which the land flowing with milk and honey was the emblem. ❧