

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

Editor

MAURICE HANDFORD

9 Birtlespool Road, Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire SK8 5JZ

Incorporating the Protestant Beacon and The British Protestant

New Series
No. 1571

JULY — AUGUST 1993

Old Series
No. 2571

Editorial

Have you noticed how often letters are mentioned in the Bible? Jezebel sought the extermination of Naboth and resorted to forgery. She "Wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal and sent the letters unto the elders and nobles" and thus the foul deed was perpetrated.

In the New Testament we have not a few letters preserved for us — those of Paul, Peter and John amongst others. Paul's letters are referred to as being "weighty and strong", and indeed they are. In the Revelation the message of the ascended Christ takes the form of the letters to the seven churches. Who can estimate what we owe to these New Testament epistles! They have fed the hearts of believers throughout the centuries.

It was fashionable years ago to publish books of letters emanating from notable people. Most of these volumes have been consigned to the flames but some few remain and are as meaningful as ever. Recently the Letters of Samuel Rutherford have been republished yet again — a volume of some seven hundred pages and first published in 1664.

We all appreciate the letters our friends write to us but letter writing today is somewhat of a dying art — it is so much easier to lift the telephone! Think however, of the possibilities of Christian letter writing. It is a ministry within the reach of all. Our letters need not be literary masterpieces but homely letters may accomplish heavenly ends. You may be very retiring and shy perhaps but your pen can be used to bring enrichment to others. Letters may be greatly used of God for the building up and encouragement of our fellow Christians

Let us use this means of service and may God give us the pen of a ready writer.

Christ the Key to the Scriptures

A Sermon by the Editor

“And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him.” Acts 8: 30/31.

Now that is a very sensible question that Philip asked of the Ethiopian officer whom he encountered in the desert. There you remember the man was poring over the pages of the Bible. “Do you understand what you are reading?” was Philip’s question. What is the use of reading the Bible if we do not make an effort to understand it? It was also a sensible question that the Ethiopian put in reply to Philip, “How can I understand unless some one gives me the clue?” You see, he obviously felt there was a clue to the Divine oracles. There was a key that would unlock its meaning and make it intelligible to the ordinary reader. “Understandest thou what thou readest?” “How can I unless someone gives me the clue?” And how right was the Ethiopian officer. There is such a clue to the Bible. What is it?

We find the clue in the story before us here. Philip the Evangelist had encountered the Ethiopian in the desert. This man was returning from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and now on his homeward journey he was sitting in his chariot reading part of the prophecy of Isaiah when Philip joined him, and, after the custom of those days, the man was reading aloud and the passage that he was reading and puzzling over was about the Saviour in Isaiah 53. The place of the Scripture which he read was this, “He was led as a sheep to the slaughter and like a lamb dumb before his shearer so He opened not His mouth. In his humiliation His judgment was taken away, and who shall declare His generation, for His life was taken from the earth.” That was the passage that this man was trying to fathom and to understand. He found it very mystifying. “Who is it” he says, “that the prophet is speaking about — Himself or of some other person?” And Philip was able to supply the answer. Look at verse 35 to the end of the chapter. He “preached unto him Jesus.” Starting from that passage he told him the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and we can easily picture Philip telling the Ethiopian something of the life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, telling him that our Lord Jesus Christ was a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief, that He was the Bearer of iniquity, that He was the Conqueror over death, and how able Philip was with the Scriptures. He was able to handle them to great profit, and he made much of Christ. If you look back in the chapter when Philip was ministering in Samaria we read he went down to that city and preached Christ unto them. This was the burden of Philip’s ministry, and now when he is ministering to one individual in the desert he began at that same Scripture and preached unto him Jesus. His message was the same, whether addressed to the multitude or to the individual. It was a Christ-centred ministry, and it tells us that Christ is the clue to the whole of the Bible, and it is impossible to have a right understanding of the Bible apart from our Lord Jesus Christ, just as it is impossible to have a right understanding of Christ apart from the Bible. The two go together, the Bible, the written Word bearing witness to Christ the Incarnate Word, and the two go together — never to be separated. Christ, then, is

the theme of the Bible, and that is the theme of my message to you now, and, to try and illustrate this and to show you that Christ is the clue to the Bible in both Old and New Testaments. Perhaps you remember that reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews, how the writer quotes from Psalm 40 where it says, "In the volume of the Book it is written of Me, I delight to do Thy will, O my God: yea, Thy law is within my heart," etc. And Martin Luther enquired, "What Book is it, and what is the Person?" and he answered, "There is only one Book, the Bible, and there is only one Person, Jesus Christ." "In the volume of the Book it is written of Me" and the Bible everywhere portrays our Lord Jesus Christ. That is obvious, of course, as regards the New Testament, for as soon as we open the Volume we are confronted with a four-fold portrait of Christ, the record of His life and ministry in the Gospels, and the story continues in the Acts of the Apostles where Christ is at work in the world through His Church and in the Apostolic Letters, the Epistles of the New Testament, we can read more of His Person and work and discover what He means to us individually, and when we get to the last Book of all, there we see Christ finally triumphing and reigning in power and glory as King of kings and Lord of lords. Christ, undoubtedly, is the theme of the New Testament. So much for the New Testament.

But we need to ask what about the Old Testament? Does that also testify to Christ? Can we expect to find Him there? And my answer is emphatically "Yes". But I have a higher authority. Let Christ Himself supply the answer as to the theme of the Old Testament. You remember to the Jews of His own day our Lord said in John 5:39, "Search the Scriptures, for in them ye think ye have eternal life, and they are they which testify of Me." Or to put it another way, "You study the Scriptures diligently supposing that in them you have eternal life. Yet, although their testimony points to Me, you refuse to come to Me for that life." And by the Scriptures our Lord plainly meant the Old Testament and the testimony of those Scriptures He declares pointed to Himself. And He was reiterating this claim over and over again during the course of His earthly life and ministry. You remember we read at the end of the Gospels "Heaven and earth shall pass away but My Word shall not pass away." And just immediately before the Cross and Passion our Lord said, "The Son of Man goeth as it is written of Him". And this sums up His consistent approach to His earthly life and mission; the path that He was treading had already been mapped out for Him in the pages of Holy Writ. But by way of illustration let me take two illustrations from Luke's Gospel, one at the beginning of our Lord's ministry and one at the end. The one at the beginning is to be found in Luke chapter 4 when our Lord paid a visit to Nazareth His home town. But prior to that something very significant had happened, because our Lord had been baptized, you remember, the heaven was opened and the Spirit descended in bodily form upon Him, and a voice from heaven was heard to say "This is My Beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased." And then immediately in the power of the Spirit He returned to Galilee and thus came to Nazareth and on the Sabbath day He went into the Synagogue and stood up to read the lesson and the passage He read was this from Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me for He hath anointed Me to preach the Gospel to the poor" etc. and when He had finished reading He sat down, gave the Book again to the minister and astonished the people by saying, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears." "Today in your very hearing this Scripture finds its fulfilment." Think of it, the words written by the Hebrew prophet hundreds of years before were that very day being fulfilled, and they were fulfilled in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, He was the promised Messiah, the Lord's Anointed.

The Prophet had foretold His coming, the Jewish people had been waiting and looking for that coming and "Now" said Jesus, "God has fulfilled His Word, the Messiah has appeared and I am He." "This day this Scripture is fulfilled in your ears. That was at the outset of His ministry.

Come with me to the end of Luke's Gospel where the risen Christ endorses His claim to be the very Centre of Holy Writ. You remember that most beautiful and attractive story of the walk to Emmaus on that first Easter Day, how the risen Christ, unrecognized, joined the two disciples who were trudging the weary miles from Jerusalem to Emmaus, and those two disciples were sad and disillusioned, the bottom had dropped out of their world. Oh they had believed Jesus to have been the long-expected Messiah, but, alas, contrary to all their hopes and expectations, He had been crucified, dead and buried, and that to them seemed all wrong. A suffering Messiah just did not fit in to their thinking. "Jesus drew near and went with them," and He spoke to them and He showed them their mistake, and their mistake was this, that they had misunderstood the Scriptures and so He said to them, "How slow you are to believe all that the prophets have said. Was not the Messiah bound to suffer thus and to enter upon His glory?" And notice, "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." In other words He was the Interpreter of the passages that refer to Himself in every part of the Scriptures. And what a Bible reading that must have been! And no doubt when our Lord was dealing with the prophetic Scriptures He would refer to Isaiah chapter 53, that passage which the Ethiopian Officer was reading in the desert when Philip met him and from which same passage Philip expounded the good news of Jesus Christ.

So we come back to where we began. I believe that Christ is the Key. He is the Clue to the Scriptures. And the Bible as a whole speaks of Him, in the Old Testament in terms of promise — in the New Testament in terms of fulfilment, or as Augustine, one of the early Fathers said, "The New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is by the New revealed." or we could put it another way, the Old Testament would not have been written if Christ had not been coming, and the New Testament would not have been written if Christ had not come. And Advent reminds us of the One Who came in the fulness of time, and came in great humility. Christ, then, is the Clue to the Bible, and unless we see Him in the Old Testament, we read to little purpose.

But I go on to say that Christ is not only the Clue to the Bible but He is the Clue to life itself, and He is the answer to our deepest need, and as Christ is the Centre of the Bible, of Holy Writ, He should be at the very centre of our life and our being. Do you remember how Paul puts it in the Letter to the Colossians, "That in all things Christ might have the pre-eminence." He is pre-eminent in the Bible. Is He pre-eminent in our lives? "Understandest thou what thou readest?" And how important it is that when we read the Bible we make an effort to understand it, for it is not sufficient to read it. We need to understand it. The Book was written not to mystify us but to make things clear. It was written to be understood, and it only benefits us in proportion as we get down to the meaning. And so the mere words of Scripture passing over our ears or before our eyes can do us little good. It is a mine; we must dig down and get its precious truths. It is an ocean and we must drive to get its choicest pearls. "Understandest thou what thou readest?" And, said the Ethiopian, "How can I except someone give me the key?" The Key is none other than Christ Himself.

Let our Bible reading be increasingly precious to us, and may we see more clearly as

never before the wonder and the beauty of our Lord Jesus Christ in the perfection of His Being and in the perfection of His work, and remember that He ever lives and He will company with those who seek Him and they will find Him and He will be to them as He is in the Scripture the very Centre of life and give life purpose and meaning. So, may God bless His Word for Christ's sake, Amen.

M.H.

Growth

KENNETH ASHWORTH

When the Apostle Peter humbly and sincerely confessed his love for the Risen Lord, the Lord gave him a twofold command: "Feed my lambs, My sheep, My dear sheep"; and "Follow Me" (John 21:15-22). We have seen something of what the life of discipleship meant to Peter.

Let us see how he fulfilled the Lord's command to "Feed His flock". Food, of course, is essential to growth. Where there is life there must be growth, and all who have been "begotten unto a lively hope" by God, all who have been "born again of incorruptible seed" must experience spiritual growth, a growth which is clearly manifest (1 Peter 1:3,23). Now God who gives to us eternal life in His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 5:11), provides the necessary sustenance for growth, "Man doth not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3). Just as He bountifully provided manna for the children of Israel in the wilderness, so He provides the food whereby His children will grow in knowledge, holiness, love, power, and grace (John 6:32-33,35; 2 Peter 3:18).

As we read Peter's "Sermons" in the Acts we see that he did feed the people of God by preaching the Word, which pointed men to the Living Word, the Lord Jesus. Likewise he exhorted his readers "as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the Word, that ye may grow thereby". It is a strange phrase, "the sincere milk of the Word", but the meaning is clear. Peter is referring again to "the Word of God which liveth and abideth for ever". This is the pure, unadulterated, incorruptible Word by which we can "taste that the Lord is gracious"; by which we can come to Him the "living stone" and be made "living stones" of His Spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:3-5).

O that we might say with the Psalmist: "O how I love Thy Law . . . it is my meditation all the day . . . I will never forget Thy statutes . . . how sweet are thy words unto my mouth . . . Thy Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path . . . Thy law is my delight" (Psalm 119. See also Job 23:12; Jer. 15:16; 1 Cor. 3:2; Rev. 2:7, 17).

Yet we must carefully note the Apostle's words: "Desire the sincere milk of the Word *that ye may grow*". We desire the Word not only for pleasure and delight, though such it is; not only for increase of knowledge, though such is necessary. Our object in desiring the Word, in studying daily with intense interest the Truth revealed therein is that we may grow thereby, that we may, as men of God, "be thoroughly furnished for every good