

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

LETTERS 1—12

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Contents

LETTER		PAGE
1.	THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE COURSE	
2.	THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE	
3.	THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS	
4.	THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY	
5.	GOD'S DEALING WITH SIN	
6.	THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM	
7.	THE KINGDOM OF GOD	
8.	THE LIFE OF JESUS	
9.	THE DEATH OF JESUS	
10.	THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS (Also see: LETTER 3)	
11.	THE RETURN OF JESUS	
12.	UNDERSTANDETH THOU WHAT THOU READEST?	
	CONCLUSION	

1. THE ARRANGEMENT OF THE COURSE

Three agents must play their part if this course is to be a success: ourselves, yourselves, and the Bible. This letter, with those which follow it, is our part in the arrangement. Your part is a double one: First, to read what we have to say, and then to go to the Bible. There is then no doubt that the Bible will fulfill its own part faithfully.

In short, while we want you to read the letters as they are issued, their purpose will have failed unless you read the Bible also. They do not claim to stand alone, they do not offer an easy way of understanding the Book without reading it, they do try to suggest a way of reading it which will let the word of God speak its own message clearly. It will therefore be an essential part of this course to follow certain Bible readings, and follow them faithfully. Each letter will give a selection of chapters to be read, and it will be understood that you have read the portions suggested in this one—and so on throughout the course.

But we do not wish the usefulness of these letters to be limited to the short message they contain. It is obviously impossible to cover all the ground in this way, and there must arise, from time to time, questions in your mind which you would like to discuss. We want you, therefore to consider yourself at liberty to send any questions and comments you choose, and we will do our best to give you a full and satisfactory answer from the Bible. Such knowledge as we ourselves have of the word of God, has been gained from a regular reading of the whole Book. This is our chief training, and this is our pride. We want it to become your pride also.

THE MEANING OF UNDERSTANDING

At this point, please read Acts, chapter 8, verses 26-40.

This story will show as well as any other what we mean by understanding. A man is reading the Old Testament (actually Isaiah chapter 53), and is clearly in some doubt as to its meaning when a disciple of Jesus is sent to talk to him, for when Philip asks him whether he understands what he is reading, he has to answer that he does not. At this point Philip proceeds to explain to him. The passage he is reading is about Jesus. What Philip said about Jesus is not told, but we are told what it led to. The man who had been reading a book, suddenly called attention to a pool of water, and asked to be baptized.

Without pursuing the details of this story, notice the moral: as soon as the man came to know what the Bible had to say about Jesus he wanted to do something. Understanding the Bible is bound to lead that way. It is not possible to be really aware what the Bible teaches, and do nothing about it. This is our warning from the start: understanding the Bible will mean seeing that it asks something from us. But this is not all. This man did what he saw he must, and the last we hear of him is that “he went on his way rejoicing”. Whatever it was that he did, and for whatever reasons he did it, it was obvious that he found it very satisfactory. This is our invitation from the start: the Bible asks us to do something, but those who really understand it

find it delightful to do as it asks. Jesus said, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in my heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29-30).

HOW THE BIBLE IS ARRANGED

At the front of all Bibles is a list of the ‘Books’ they contain. The Bible is made up of the writings of many men, written over a vast period of time, and the separate writings are the ‘Books’ of the Bible. These letters will take it for granted that the Books really were written, at the time, and by the people that they claim for themselves. Taking this list of contents, then, we can describe the make-up of the Bible thus:

THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. THE BOOKS OF MOSES: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These describe the creation of the world by God, the failure of the first man and woman under test, and the history of the first ages of their children’s inheritance. After the sin in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), the first period of wickedness comes to its end in the destruction of the Flood (Genesis 6), and a new start is made with the children of Noah. From the descendants of this man, a single individual, Abraham, is selected by God of Genesis 12), and with the story of the wanderings of this man, and Isaac and Jacob and his descendants, begins the account of God’s Chosen People, Israel, now known as the Jews.

The rest of the Old Testament is about this people. The end of Genesis shows them settled in the land of Egypt. The Book of Exodus gives the account of the way in which God brought them out from there by the hand of Moses, and through the remaining books of this section we are given the record of their wanderings towards Canaan (Palestine), and of the great Law which God gave to them from Mount Sinai. The section closes with the death of Moses, leaving Israel on the borders of the Promised Land.

2. THE BOOKS OF JOSHUA AND JUDGES: The first of these takes the nation of Israel, by the hand of God, into Palestine, and sees them established there. The second shows their varying fortune under their judges, showing their misfortunes when they turn away from God, and their deliverance when they turn back to Him. The book of RUTH is set within this latter period, and prepares the way for the next section by giving, at the end, the names of the ancestors of David.

3. THE BOOKS OF SAMUEL, KINGS and CHRONICLES: These six books show the people choose to be ruled over by an earthly king, although God is their true King. After the fall of their first king, Saul, God appoints over them the David of whom we have just spoken, and the sons of David continue to reign over some part of the nation from this time to the end of the books. The kingdom does not long last in its early glory. The prosperity of Solomon’s reign is followed by the splitting of the nation into two sections, of which only the southern, Judah, remains true to the house of David. (The maps at the end of our Bible will show us the

approximate positions of the two kingdoms). The northern kingdom is ruled over by a succession of evil dynasties, and destroyed by the Assyrians about 700 years before Christ, the southern has occasional good kings (like Jotham and Hezekiah and Josiah), but finally falls in its own wickedness, and comes to an end not much more than a century afterwards. Its inhabitants are (except for the poorest of them) taken away into Babylon.

With this event the story of these books closes, except that the last chapter of the last of them (2 Chronicles) prepares us for the next stage.

4. THE BOOKS OF EZRA, NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER: In Ezra and Nehemiah the story is told of the return to Palestine of those Jews who took their opportunity of going: Esther described what occurred in Persia to those who elected to stay behind.

5. THE POETICAL BOOKS: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon. Up to this stage we have had straightforward history. But the book of Job deals with a problem which has existed throughout all history, when it pictures a righteous man trying to solve the problems of his sufferings, and teaches us the meaning of faith in God, and a proper humility in His presence. The books of Psalms consists of songs, many of them composed by David and some used in the worship of God in Solomon's Temple. In this book there are poems of the past history of God's people, poems wrung from David's own experience, and poems which look forward to great events of the future. The book of Proverbs is a record of the wise sayings of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes of his adventures through the pleasures and ambitions of life, until he comes to the conclusion of the whole matter", and teaches those who read his book to "fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man". The love-song of the song of Solomon is believed to point forward as in a parable to the work of Jesus.

6. THE PROPHETS: These are the remaining books of the Old Testament. They include long works like those in Isaiah, Jeremiah (with Lamentations), Ezekiel and Daniel, and a set of twelve shorter ones (usually called the Minor Prophets), from Hosea to Malachi. They are the writings of men who spoke the word of God to His people during the time of the Kingdom (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and others), while they were in exile (Ezekiel, Daniel), or when some of them had gone back to their own land (Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi).

THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. THE FOUR GOSPELS: Matthew, Mark Luke and John, These tell the story of the earthly work of Jesus. They give a good deal of space to His birth of the Virgin Mary (Matthew and Luke), very little to his childhood, much to the three years He spent in preaching the gospel, and a relatively enormous amount to the last week of His life and the accounts of His using from the dead. They close with the record of His going to heaven.

2. THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES takes up the story where the Gospel of Luke ends (for Luke wrote this book also), it tells how the disciples of Jesus set about their work of making His Gospel known, both to Jews, and to Gentiles like ourselves, beginning mainly with the

work of Peter, Jesus' most prominent disciple of the twelve, and concluding with the great missionary work of Paul, a one-time enemy of the Gospel who had been miraculously converted.

3. THE LETTERS OF PAUL: from Romans to Hebrews. These are letters written by the great Apostle to the Churches which he founded or visited, or, in the case of Philemon Timothy and Titus, to men whom he had converted. They are not merely letters, however, but contain Paul's defence of the Gospel against its enemies, and much teaching and advice of value to Christians throughout all ages.

4. LETTERS BY OTHER DISCIPLES: James, Peter, John and Jude.

5. THE REVELATION. This is the last recorded message of Jesus in the Bible. It is given, as it says, "to show unto his servant things which must shortly come to pass", and it contains a detailed prophecy of the progress of the world towards the time when Jesus shall come back to the earth, and set up here God's kingdom among men.

THE DATES OF THE BIBLE

We do not need to go into any detail here, and these round figures will do as well as we shall need: Abraham lived 2000 B.C., that is about as long before Christ as we live afterwards. Moses brought the tribes of Israel out of Egypt, probably about 600 years later, the first king was on the throne about 400 years later again, and the last was removed about 400 years later still. Six hundred years after that, Christ was born. For our purpose, then, we can be satisfied with:—

2000 B.C.	Call of Abraham (Genesis 12)
1400 B.C.	Exodus from Egypt
1000 B.C.	First human king over Israel
600 B.C.	Last king removed from the throne

The New Testament deals with a much shorter period of time, starting with the events leading up to the birth of Jesus Christ and ending about a hundred years later. "B.C." and "A.D." will do nicely as summing up the distinction between the two parts of the Bible, but we shall quickly see that, although the New Testament is concerned with Christ from beginning to end, the old Testament has very much to say about Him too. It is for this, indeed, that its importance to us is so great.

READING

Since in this letter we have been concerned with the Bible as a whole, it is not possible to select readings which bear specially upon its subject. There are a few chapters, however, which sum up the story of the Bible very effectively and which will help us to see whole the period with which it deals. The following selection should therefore be read in connection with this letter.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: Psalms 105, 106 and 136

IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: Acts 7:1-50; 13:17-23; Hebrews 11.

A.D.N.

LETTER 2: “The Authority of the Bible”

2. THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE

At this point we begin to see why understanding the Bible is such an important matter. The Bible is not like other books. The one of whom we read in Acts 8 would never have been moved to do the thing he did by reading even the greatest of other works. The difference is simple but profound, the Bible claims throughout its length to be the Word of God. It was men, certainly, who put pen to paper, but the message came from God Himself. See how extensive the claims are:—

1. THE OLD TESTAMENT’S CLAIM FOR ITSELF: Only a few examples out of hundreds can be given. Turn up the ones we mention here, and as you go through further Bible-reading, make a note of the others you come across. They will be very many. Take first the books of Moses. No greater claim for the authority of the words in them could be made than Exodus 31:18, “He gave unto Moses. . . two tables of testimony. . . written with the finger of God”, but the same authority is claimed for all that is recorded in these books: Look through the first verses of the books of Leviticus and Numbers, and count the number of times where it is said “The Lord spake unto Moses”. Evidently the word so given, with the account of Israel’s journeys, was written in a book during Moses’ lifetime, and the Law written therein was to be the divine guide of any rules the people might make (Deuteronomy 17:18-19). Their great leader, Joshua, was commanded by God, “This book of the law shall not depart out of my mouth: but Thou shalt meditate therein day and night” (Joshua 1:8).

The claims are more far-reaching than mere repetition of words can show. Time after time, things are recorded of God which must either be true, and revealed by God Himself, or the purest invention. Take this example: “God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth”, (Genesis 6:5), or this: Abraham “believed in the LORD, and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6), and ask how the writer could possibly have known either of these things unless God Himself had told him, and then the nature of the claims will become plain:

With the prophets the claims are just as emphatic. Expressions such as “The word of the LORD came unto me”, “Hear ye the word of the LORD”, and “Thus saith the LORD” are constantly to

be found. Look at these examples taken from the early chapters of Isaiah 1:2; 1:10; 1:20; 1:24; 3:16; 7:3; 7:10; 8:1—to which very many others can be added without difficulty.

The prophets were well aware what was meant by God's speaking to them: When Jeremiah tried to stop prophesying, "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing and I could not stay" (Jeremiah 20:9). When Amos tried to explain what it was like to receive God's word, he said: "The lion hath roared, who will not fear? The LORD GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8).

2. THE NEW TESTAMENT'S CLAIMS FOR THE OLD: Jesus and His apostles fully accept these claims of the Old Testament. "The scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35) is what Jesus says. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" is Paul's echo (2 Timothy 3:16), and "The prophecy came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" is Peter's confirmation (2 Peter 1:21). And once again, it is not merely statements like this which make us sure where the New Testament stands. The whole spirit in which Jesus and the rest of the characters in the New Testament use the Old shows that they regard it as being the reliable Word of God. "It is written" is to them a proof that God said so (See for example, Matthew 4:4, 6, 7, 10).

3. THE NEW TESTAMENT'S CLAIM'S FOR ITSELF: these are of the same kind. In the past, "God at sundry times and in divers manners spake unto the fathers by the prophets" (Hebrews 1:1): now He has "spoken unto us by his Son". Jesus Himself speaks "as one having authority" (Matthew 7:29), and He claims. "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). Telling His disciples of the time when He should leave them, He promised that the Holy Spirit which should come to them from heaven should "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

Therefore, the Apostles refer to their own writings as "Scripture", just as they do to the works of the Old Testament: When Paul says, "The Scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward" (1 Timothy 5:18), the first part of the "Scripture" comes from the book of Deuteronomy (25:4), and the second from the Gospel of Luke (10:7). Peter tells us that Paul's letters are like the other inspired books (2 Peter 3:15-16), and Paul says of his own writings: "If any man think himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord". (1 Corinthians 14:37).

We see now what the Bible says it is. If it is true, obviously no attention we can pay to it is too great, for the Book is God speaking to us. It may be that we do not question its truth, or it may be that the modern outlook upon religion has unsettled us and made us wonder. In the former case, what follows will only confirm us, and make us value the Book more highly. In the latter, it may help to bridge for us the chasm which doubt has dug in the path of obedience.

THE REASONS FOR BELIEVING THE BIBLE

These are many. The most important of them all is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. A special letter will be devoted to this, and we will now only consider what it proves, if it is true. In that event, as Paul says, Jesus is “declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). If Jesus is so proved to be the Son of God, it is clear that anything He claims for the authority of His words must be true. And since He says (as we have seen) that the Old Testament is the word of God, while His disciples will be inspired to write the new, then this must be the case. It would be a bold (or vain) man who would set any opinion of his own against the Son of God.

But consider the alternatives: if the Book is not divine. I then the writers who claim that it is can only be either deluded (thinking that God has compelled them to speak when He did not) or fraudulent (claiming what they knew that they had not got). Both these choices are impossible.

Neither fools nor rogues could have invented the words of grace with which the Book abounds. Neither could have insisted upon so high a moral standard, and at the same time be so brutally frank with the failing of their heroes. The prophets (and our Lord Himself) did not arise naturally out of the times in which they lived, for their times rejected them. Even the very friends of Jesus could not understand the gentle gospel He bade them believe, and they followed Him in spite of His teaching, not because of it, because there was an indisputable divinity about Him which they were obliged to receive. Even now, indeed, among the many who cannot help but admit the divine origin of the teaching of Jesus, there are few who are willing to commit themselves to obey it.

This is a proof in another way, too. If the woman had rapturously received the doctrine which Jesus taught, that very doctrine would have been proved false. As we shall see in a later letter, Jesus did not expect the world to be converted by His message. “Strait is the gate and narrow is the way which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it”. (Matthew 7:14; Luke 13:24). Jesus prophesied a time of general unbelief before He should come back to the earth (Luke 17:26-30) and we are faced with the strange situation that if the world had believed Him, He would have been wrong!

This does not mean, of course, that Christianity has failed, or will fail, as we shall see. Jesus will bring about its resounding success in His own way, with those who do believe and are ready for Him.

THE EVIDENCE OF PROPHECY

The last section ended with an example of this. Jesus correctly foretold the state of the world in our own time, and it would be beyond the power of man—particularly of a man seeking disciples—to do this. But the Bible is full of the words of prophets claiming to say what will happen in the distant future. These are not purposeless predictions: the Bible is no almanac of

astrologers' tales, but a purposeful setting out of the purpose of God, telling us how far it has gone, and leading us all the time to its final completion.

Thus, Genesis 3:15 is the first of a long line of prophecies which tell of the coming of a Saviour to the world. Here it is foretold that He shall destroy the power of sin. In other places we are told that He shall be the descendant of Abraham (such as Genesis 22:18), of David (2 Samuel 7:12) and of God Himself (2 Samuel 7:14). We are given pictures—of which more will be said—of His suffering and crucifixion and resurrection. The detail and precision with which these things are foretold is amazing. Not all the prophecies concerning Jesus have yet received their fulfilment, for His work is not yet done. But those who have seen the fulfilment so far can look forward confidently for the rest.

Again, from the time of Abraham, God chose the nation of Israel to perform His work upon the earth. Two chapters Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, foretell what would happen to that nation if it were disobedient, and the prophecies were bitterly but accurately fulfilled. Who can think of what it means now to call anyone a “Jew”, and not see the fulfilment of Deuteronomy 28:37? But in all the sufferings of Israel, the prophets say also that the nation will not be destroyed. Always we are told that a remnant shall be saved (for example Ezekiel 5) and we are told to look forward to a time when the people shall be restored to their own land (as in Jeremiah 30 and 31).

Old and New Testaments combine to look forward to this time. And when they tell us of it, they say that the return of the Jews to Palestine will take place when the world is in a turmoil, when there are wars and rumours of wars, in a time of trouble such as never was (Daniel 12:1; Ezekiel, chapters 36 to 39; Joel 3; Luke 21:24-26).

We can look upon the fulfilment of these words and marvel.

We can see how the Jews, unbelieving Jews, have fulfilled the words of the prophets in their troubles, we can see how they have fulfilled them in surviving, in spite of all the efforts of their enemies to wipe them out, we can see how in our own time, the return of over 2,000,000 Jews to Palestine within a generation (in a time of trouble and war such as have not been known before), have demonstrated the accuracy of the prophets' foretellings. And once again, we can look forward to something of which the prophets speak, but which has not happened yet.

And while the Bible tells us of the fortunes of Israel, it tells us also of the nations with whom she comes in contact. “Though I make a full end of all nations whither I have scattered thee, yet will I not make a full end of thee” (Jeremiah 30:11). We know it has happened: ancient Egypt, ancient Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome and many others have gone as the prophets said they should, while Israel has remained. This, too, has its purpose: Daniel 2 gives us a vivid picture of the passing of four great empires, to prepare us for what shall happen when they and their remnants have passed. For this, we look to the future again. There will be more to say of this.

The evidence of the prophecy is powerful. Its fulfilment shows us that the Book is such as men could never have produced. The details of its predictions demand that we recognize God as the Author of them. But in the very act of proving the Bible to be true, the prophecies prove it to be purposeful, they show us that the things which happen upon the earth are known before to God, and they prepare us for a time when God's work will come to its perfection upon the earth.

The prophecies prove, in short, not only that the Bible is true and inspired, but that it is significant, and significant to us. Jesus after foretelling the troubles in the world of which we have spoken, said to His disciples, "When ye see these things begin to come to pass, lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh". (Luke 21:28). What this redemption is we shall see in a later letter:

READING

Like the last, this letter has been general. But the section on prophecy makes it desirable that some of the more straightforward prophetic chapters should be read:

OLD TESTAMENT: Deuteronomy 28; Isaiah 53; Jeremiah 30 and 31; Ezekiel 36 and 37; Daniel 2; Joel 3.

NEW TESTAMENT: Luke 17:20-37; Luke 21; 2 Timothy 3 and 4.

LETTER 3: "The Resurrection of Jesus"

3. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

This is taken out of its natural order for a very good reason. The fact that Jesus rose from the dead is right at the centre of the evidence that Christianity is true, and that the Bible is the Word of God: If we are satisfied, on good grounds, that this Resurrection really did happen, we shall not be moved by trivial doubts which may arise on other matters, and the demands which Jesus Christ will be found to make will find a readier acceptance in our hearts. It is because this fact makes all the difference between our study being a mere hobby, and its being the basis of a career to everlasting life, that we set the demonstration of it here.

THE RECORDS

Please read at the outset the accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus to be found in:—

Matthew 26:36-28:20; Luke 22:39-24:48

Mark 14:32-16:20; John 10:1-20:29

These readings include a good deal other than the actual record of the Resurrection itself, so as to give us the setting of the whole incident. There will be other pieces of evidence which will be referred to as we go along.

THE STORY

We can piece together the different records to read something like this: After Jesus had eaten the Last Supper with the disciples, and Judas (one of them) had departed to betray Him into the hands of His enemies, He went with the rest of them to the Garden of Gethsemane. Here Judas led the band of men who were to arrest Him, and Jesus was taken for His trial. Actually His trial was of two kinds: before the Jews He was convicted on a charge of Blasphemy because He admitted the title of Son of God, but this charge would have been of no weight before the Roman governor. Before him, therefore. He was accused of sedition because He accepted the title of King of the Jews, and Pilate was driven by fear to endorse the Jewish sentence of death.

After many indignities, Jesus was taken to Golgotha and crucified between two wrong-doers, in the presence of His mother. His disciple John, and certain believing women who included Mary Magdalene. Upon His death the body was removed by two influential Jews who believed in Him, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, and placed in a tomb belonging to the latter. Here the stone was sealed by the order of the High Priest, and a guard was set.

Before dawn, however, the guard was rudely disturbed by angelic visitation, and fled. The stone was rolled away from the door, and when the later visitors came, Jesus was no longer there. At about dawn, women who had witnessed the crucifixion came to anoint the body, no doubt by arrangement with Joseph, for when they came near the garden they asked, "Who shall roll away the stone?", as though they had been disappointed of expected help. (There is a legend that Joseph had been taken into custody by the High Priest, which fits the facts very well). Coming near the tomb, however, the married women found it empty, and, receiving a command from the angel there to tell the disciples of the Resurrection, fled away, afraid.

Successively, then, events occurred which brought to the disciples the conviction that Jesus really had risen. Peter and John saw the empty tomb, and John saw there evidence which persuaded him that Jesus must have emerged alive: Mary Magdalene was greeted by the Lord Himself, and afterwards the other women also. Two disciples walking from Jerusalem to a near-by village were encountered by Jesus, who made Himself known to them by "Breaking Bread" as He had done at the Last Supper. He appeared through closed doors to the body of the disciples in Jerusalem (when Thomas was absent) and yet again (with Thomas present). He encountered them again, by appointment, in Galilee, and also (to their surprise) as they were fishing in the lake. They saw Him ascend into heaven (read here Acts 1:1-12).

Much later a confirmed enemy of the Gospel, Saul of Tarsus, was given a special vision of Jesus from heaven, as he was going to persecute the disciples (read Acts 9:1-20). There is a summary of some of these appearances, and one or two others, in 1 Corinthians 15:1-7).

THE NATURE OF THE DISCIPLES' BELIEF

The first thing to notice about these records is the way in which they represent the disciples as coming to believe. Without a single exception, they started off with blank unbelief, demanded the strongest of evidence, and were not persuaded until they received it. The women thought the body had been taken away. Mary's first impression was that Jesus was the gardener. The disciples walking to Emmaus had been astonished but unconvinced by the women's story. Those in Jerusalem laughed at the women's accounts as at idle tales, and believed them not, and would not accept the story of those who claimed to have seen Him. Thomas did not believe although the united voice of the others declared the truth of it, until he had seen the Master with his own eyes and had the opportunity of handling His body (which Jesus invited all the disciples to do). Saul was not only unbelieving, but hostile, before his miraculous conversion.

This is a significant fact. In the most natural way possible the records unite to tell us that the disciples behaved just as we should expect men to behave in such circumstances and that Jesus provided just the kind of proof which men would need to convince them. If the stories are not true, they are remarkably true to life.

This can be taken further. When the disciples had been convinced they set about preaching the Gospel to other people, who were as hard to convince as they had been. And so, as Jesus had "showed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs" so they were ready to give the witness of those proofs to the world: Indeed this word "WITNESS" becomes a prominent one in their preaching from then on. Look up the following passages: Luke 24:48; Acts 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15; 10:38-42; 13:30-31; 26:12-18. There is no suggestion of conspiracy in all these, but the unity with which the same kind of claim is made, and the same proof is offered, is surely impressive.

This the more so when we remember what kind of men they have been, There is no mistaking the Gospels' portrait of the disciples before Jesus's death. They had great hopes of Him as a King, but none at all as a dead man. They would go anywhere with Him (even to death) so long as they thought that He would strive for victory: "I will lay down my life for thy sake" (John 13:37) was no idle boast on Peter's part, for he actually set about to do it in the Garden (Matthew 26:51; John 18:10). But Jesus's refusal to be defended and His unresisting death left them stupefied. They were brave enough when there was a goal they could see, but when their Master took away the very hope in which they had followed Him, they lost heart, and fled terrified. "We trusted that it had been He which should have redeemed Israel" (Luke 24:21) they confessed afterwards in their disillusionment. With His crucifixion their expectations were dashed.

There was no suggestion of hysteria in all this. The matter-of-fact way in which they had expected Jesus to accept a Kingdom, and followed Him so, was succeeded by an equally matter-of-fact assurance that everything was all right now, because they had seen Him, listened to Him, and eaten and drunk with Him (Acts 10:41) after He had risen from the dead.

Nothing short of the obvious answer will explain the change and the conviction it brought to those who heard them. They knew that Jesus was alive as really as He had been before. They invited searching of the evidence: “More than 500 saw Him—and they are mostly alive and waiting to be asked” is the spirit in which they preached: (1 Corinthians 15:6).

THE CASE OF THE APOSTLE PAUL

This is in some ways the most remarkable of all. No one can doubt that the Christian Gospel did spread over the Roman world at a tremendous speed, and that some stupendous event is required to account for it. Equally, no one denies that the bulk of the credit for this spread goes (humanly speaking) to a man who was not among Jesus’s first disciples. His conversion has already been mentioned. His later history occupies the second half of the Acts of the Apostles, and many of the letters which follow. He began as a confirmed enemy of the faith. Suddenly he turned, and became its most energetic preacher. He claimed that the change was due to the fact that he, also, had seen the risen Jesus. “Last of all He was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time”. (1 Corinthians 15:8).

THE EVIDENCE OF THE SCRIPTURES

It is too early in this course to go into this in detail. It is worth noting, however, that Jesus is said to have devoted His first opportunity (after the Resurrection) to showing His disciples that His death and resurrection were foretold in the Old Testament (Luke 24:25-27; 24:45-46). The most rapid reading of the Acts shows the apostles persuading the Jews in the same way. There is one remarkable passage in which Paul says that the Jews who crucified Jesus fulfilled their Bible-prophecy, but only because they were ignorant of what it meant! (Acts 13:27): Obviously the Jews could not have dared to have Jesus done to death if they had known that their prophets proved that they were slaying the Christ of God, the Messiah. But this is precisely what they did. Without troubling too much at this stage about the details, look up Daniel 9:24-27, which sets the time when Christ shall come, tells of His “cutting off” (or judicial death), and speaks of its purpose.

The Scriptures actually go further, for they tell of the time when the Gospel shall be preached to the Gentiles by the work of the Servant of God (for example, Isaiah 49:5-6), a fact which was recognised by the aged man who took the child Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:25-33), and a fact to which Jesus Himself called attention (Luke 24:46-47), And of course we know that it happened.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES

A great deal of this evidence is admitted by the most doubting of doubters. When those who do not believe that Jesus rose bodily from the dead recognise that the tomb in which the body had been placed must have been empty as the Scriptures say it was, then there must be some explanation of its removal. According to the Gospel of Matthew, the Jews invented the theory that the disciples had stolen the body, and a writer of the second century shows us that the Jews

were still saying that then. But can anything be more unlikely than that these disappointed men should steal the body of the man who had disappointed them, hide it, invent a story that it had risen, and then proceed to die for their legend?

In later days it has been suggested that the women went to the wrong tomb, the evidence being obtained by taking Mark 16:6 making it read quite differently, and ignoring the rest of the chapter. How the stolid menfolk became convinced is not satisfactorily explained even if this fantastic tale could be received. Alternatively, it is said that Jesus did not really die on the Cross: The soldiers who omitted to break His legs (John 19:31-34) permitted Him to escape with His life, and it was only a swooning Jesus who deluded practised Roman soldiers, watchful Jews and attentive friends into thinking He was dead! This same Jesus apparently overcame the obstacle of the stone, emerged from the grave, and appeared bloody and half-dead, in the presence of His disciples, and persuaded them that He was immortal! How He covered up His subsequent death is explained by the invention of a fictitious “double”, or left unexplained altogether.

There is no doubt which conclusion is the most likely. Jesus rose from the dead, and in consequence. His own reverence for the Scriptures must be ours: His estimate of their authority will persuade us to listen to them. We are on the high road to understanding what they are about.

READING

Apart from the resurrection narratives already suggested, it would be as well to read as much as possible of the Acts of the Apostles, but particularly chapters 1, 2, 8, 9, 10, 13, 17, and 26.

A.D.N.

LETTER 4: “The Beginning of the Story”

4. THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

The first three chapters of the Bible have an importance out of all proportion to their size. This is easily seen by glancing through them. Briefly, but very plainly, they show God as the Creator of the world, and passing rapidly over His lesser works of creation, concentrate their attention upon our race. They give it a dignity higher than all when they describe Adam as made “in the image and likeness” of God. They show something of the scope of that dignity when they reveal God giving the man a position of authority over the beasts, and a position of responsibility with respect to Himself. In one dreadful passage they set the stage for all the history of sin and death which follows, and for the broadening promises of redemption which the rest of the Bible works out.

In days when the old Testament is so often ignored and despised however, and when this supremely probable account of the origin of sin is discarded as a fairy tale in favour of no explanation at all, it might encourage respect for these chapters if we show how fully the New Testament draws upon them for its own teaching: It is a simple fact that much of the New Testament cannot be understood at all without reference to these records, a fact you will not doubt (if you did before) after turning up the examples which follow.

GENESIS 1:26, "Let us make man in our image", is alluded to in 1 Corinthians 11:7, where man "is the image and glory of God", and in James 3:9, where men are "made after the similitude of God". It is the obvious basis of the words, "being in the form of God", used of Jesus in Philippians 2:6.

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife", are used by Jesus in Matthew 19:4-5 to support His teaching on the binding nature of the marriage bond. This is a most important quotation, for Jesus's teaching stands or falls with it. If we are prepared to believe the Son of God in His doctrine of marriage, we have no choice but to accept the arguments by which He establishes it.

GENESIS 2:2, "On the seventh day God ended His work which He had made", is used in Hebrews 4:4, "And God did rest the seventh day from all His works", to point forward to the completion of God's purpose in the future.

GENESIS 2:7, "The LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground . . . and man became a living soul", is the basis of a comparison between Adam and Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:45-47, where we are told, "The first man Adam was made a living soul . . . The first man is of the earth, earthy".

GENESIS 2:9, "The tree of Life also in the midst of the Garden", which was denied to the man on account of his sin, is pictured in Revelation 2:7; 22:2; 22:14, as restored to a world where God's blessing shall have ousted the curse under which it has laboured for so long.

GENESIS 3:1, 13, "The serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field . . . The serpent beguiled me", is directly referred to in 2 Corinthians 11:3, "The serpent beguiled Eve by his subtilty".

GENESIS 3:19, "Dust thou art, and unto dust shall return", is twice used directly, in Romans 5:12 "By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin", and in 1 Corinthians 15:21-22 "By man came death", "In Adam all die", and lies at the back of the whole message of the Gospel.

This is only a selection of the more obvious allusions but it is sufficient to command attention. The importance of the chapters lies not merely in the fact that they are quoted, but in the reasons which led them to be quoted. There are certain basic facts introduced here which must not be argued by those who would understand the rest of the Bible. We are brought face to face

with the meaning of Sin and Death, and through them with the hope of Righteousness and Life. We cannot have the one without the other, and it is therefore through a dark beginning such as this that our understanding must enter.

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES MEAN BY DEATH

It is most important at this point to keep our minds wide open. Many of us start with an idea of death which we supposed to be Christian and Scriptural which will wreck our hopes of understanding the Bible unless it is removed. There is a well-known verse which sums up the position.

“Life is real, life is earnest.
And the grave is not its goal”
“Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul”.

The first two lines are true of those who understand the Bible rightly. The last two are simply false of everyone, as we shall see immediately. When the Scriptures speak for themselves they speak very plainly.

For according to the second chapter of Genesis, God “formed man of the dust of the ground”, and it was when God had breathed into his nostrils the “breath of life” that he became a living soul. The living man was the living soul, precisely in the same terms as the living animals were “living creatures” (2:19), for “creatures” and “soul” are the same Hebrew word: It was this living soul to whom God said, “In the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die” (2:17). It was this living soul who disobeyed, and was sentenced to death, in the words: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it was thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return”.

There is no mistaking the teaching of this story. The living man was sentenced to death for the sin he committed. There is nothing here of a mere body going to the dust, while the soul which can live without it goes to eternal pleasure or eternal sorrow. It is the whole being of man which goes to the dust.

And this is the teaching of all the Scriptures. Death is spoken of throughout in a matter-of-fact way which shows that those who died expected their death to be, in the ordinary course of things, the end of them. Amongst a wide range of passages which could be used to show this, please read the following:—

OLD TESTAMENT: Psalms 6; 49 and 146; Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 (which practically repeats the story of Genesis 2 and 3), Isaiah 38:9-20, 40:1-8; Ezekiel 18:4.

NEW TESTAMENT: Luke 13:1-5; John 3:14-16 Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:17-22; James 1:10, 11, 15; 4:14; 1 Peter 1:22-25.

It could be pointed out, rightly, that most of the New Testament passages are not primarily talking about death at all. For example, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16) is talking about salvation. Of course this is true, and lies at the very heart of the Gospel. But the reality of death is taking its place in the statements for all that God gave His Son, “that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish”, which is very sufficient evidence that we shall perish without Him: “All flesh is grass” is the starting point, and without that we shall not be ready to receive the message of the gospel that “the word of our God endureth for ever” (Isaiah 40:8; 1 Peter 1:25).

The importance of our starting point will be plain now. If we do not know the meaning of death, we shall not be ready to hear the meaning of life. If we start correctly, with the knowledge that we are the children of Adam, and that in Adam all die”, we shall be in the best possible position to ask how we may be saved from the common lot, and in the only possible frame of mind which will enable us to take advantage of what we find.

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES MEAN BY SIN

It is just as important to have clear ideas about this. Sin, to many of us, is either the same thing as “crime”, or it is something scarcely respectable, with a dash of excitement about it. In the first case, a man is a sinner if he has broken the law, and more particularly if he has been caught and convicted for doing it. In the second, he is a sinner if he has disregarded the conventions of society, and it will depend a good deal on the circles in which he moves (and the state of public morality at the time) whether he is condemned or applauded for doing it.

Coupled with the mistaken view of sin, is a wrong attitude to sorrow about it. We may regret being found out, or we may be sorry at the consequences of something we have done, without feeling any particular shame at the wrongness of the thing itself. And we may try to “be good”, not from any necessary conviction that this is the right way, so much as from respect for the opinion of our neighbours, or the police: It may seem to follow that what society allows, God will also approve:

Now sin is certainly the breaking of Law, but not primarily, the laws of any country. It is the breaking of the Law of God: And it does not consist merely in the breach of any commandment or set of commandments. It is a state of mind which is universal among men. In Genesis 3, Adam is represented as having a choice: to obey or disobey. The issue was not simply whether he should eat a certain fruit or not, as those who think that God acted harshly may suppose. It was the graver issue as to whether he would do God’s will, or follow his own—whether he would do as he liked or whether he would do as he was told—whether he would be a faithful servant of his Creator, or whether he would try to be his own master.

The course he took was a deliberate wrong turning at the parting of the ways, and its consequences were bound to be what they were. For God has created all things, and for His pleasure they are and were created (Revelation 4:11). Our race, made “in His image” is not here

to please itself, but to do His pleasure. Then His face will shine upon it, but it is impossible otherwise. God who loves righteousness cannot do other than hate iniquity.

The course which Adam took of his own free choice, has involved all the rest of his race, “By one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, for all have sinned” (Romans 5:12). The sentence of death, the powerful disposition to sin, have passed upon us all, and so the Scriptures speak of us as having been concluded under sin (Galatians 3:22; Romans 3:23).

This is the grim lesson of our early Bible reading. But grim though it is, it is most necessary. Starting from there, and knowing that we are bound under sin, and humanly helpless, we can now go on to show how God has made it possible for sinners to approach to Him, and avail themselves of His offer of righteousness and life.

READING

Some of this has been indicated already. The first three chapters of Genesis are the subject matter, the passages in the Old and New Testaments speaking of the true meaning of death follow after. Though certain difficulties will arise which it will require later lessons to resolve, it will be well to read also the first three chapters of the Letter to the Romans.

A.D.N.

LETTER 5: “God’s Dealings with Sinners”

5. GOD’S DEALINGS WITH SINNERS

The close of Genesis 3 finds man turned out from the Garden, and separated from the close intimacy with God which existed there. “They heard the voice of the Lord God, walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8) might well have been a frequent fellowship between the man and his Creator before he chose to go his own way, but this record of it is the last. From now on, if God is to be approached by man at all, it must be in a very different fashion.

The next chapter in Genesis (4), shows us that God can, in fact, be approached, and it gives us an idea of the new conditions. For Cain and Abel come before God bringing “offerings” (4:3-6) Cain brings a vegetable offering, and Abel an animal, and it is immediately made clear that God is not prepared to accept the former. There had, indeed, been a hint of this before, for when our sinful parents clothed themselves with garments of fig-leaves (3:7), God replaced them with clothes made from the skins of animals (3:21).

We can read the lessons of this account in two ways. First, it is a simple lesson in the duty of obedience. It illustrates the same problem of human nature as the story of Adam and Eve itself. Faced with the alternatives of doing as he liked or of doing as he was told, Cain appears to have decided that his own way was good enough. He was typically the man of the world, who goes his own way without reference to the wishes of God, and can therefore have no ground for complaint if God is not well pleased with him. Abel seems to have taken the other course, and done as God wished him to do. It was easier for him, perhaps, but for either it was perfectly possible. And so he was typically the man of faith, who goes God's way without regard for consequence, and is therefore acceptable to God.

Second, it illustrates an important principle. Simple obedience to God's will is a good enough reason for doing as we are told, even though we cannot decide why it is His will. But there is a deeper reason than this. This record is the first open instance of the need to shed blood before we can approach acceptably before God. The coats of skin were another of a less obvious kind. Soon we shall find this clearly expressed, but we can even at this stage discuss something of its importance. The children of Adam have no right to come to God at all. We are justly sentenced to death, and if God receives us, it is of His mercy, and on conditions. We must recognise our relative positions. We may pay our respects, and recognise our deserts. Our lives are forfeit, and the shedding of blood shows our recognition of it.

The New Testament makes great use of this record. Jesus puts Cain as the first-of the murderers, and when He tells the Jews of His day that "the blood of all the prophets, from the blood of Abel" shall come upon the people who murder Himself (Luke 11:50-51) He relates the sin of all mankind to the sin which slays Him, and for which He dies. John says of Cain that he "was of that wicked one and slew his brother because his own works were evil and his brother's righteous" (1 John 3:12). Now there is nothing on the face of it evil in bringing an offering of vegetables, or particularly righteous in bringing animals. But what we have said before of the real nature of sin will show us how just John's comment is: sin is pleasing ourselves rather than God, and therefore Cain was the sinner, and Abel the righteous man. The letter to the Hebrews takes this up: "By faith . . . Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain by which he obtained witness that he was righteous" (11:4). A man of faith is a man of trust, who accepts God's way and follows it wherever it leads, and the examples in this chapter of Hebrews will engage us again. In Abel's case it led to death, but this is not the end of it. The next chapter of Hebrews, speaking of the death of Jesus, talks of "the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel" (12:24). Abel shed blood, and Abel's blood was shed, and this double significance points forward to the time (now in history) when Jesus also would give His blood to be shed. This is anticipating another, and the greatest, importance of blood sacrifice, and we must retrace our steps for a while before discussing this further.

"IT IS THE BLOOD THAT MAKETH ATONEMENT"

After the acceptable sacrifice of Abel, it is clear that the system of blood-offerings became a general one for men who wished to come to God. Examples which can be turned up to show

this are: Genesis 8:20; 12:7; 15:9; 22:13; 31:54; Exodus 5:3. We leave the history of this period to make itself plain in the reading which should accompany this letter, so as to concentrate on this matter of sacrifice, for as soon as we pass from this last reference to the time when God led His people out by the hand of Moses into the wilderness, and there gave them His Law, we find an elaborate code of sacrifice laid down, and detailed rules given as to how it is to be carried out. As the Letter to the Hebrews says again “According to the law, I may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood and apart from shedding of blood there is no remission” (9:22, Revised Version*)

The sacrifices are intimately associated with SIN: “In those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year” (Hebrews 10:3) and a most important word used in connection with them is ATONEMENT, as in the passage with which this section is headed: “It is the blood which maketh an atonement for the soul” (Leviticus 17:11). The English word seems to be a fusing together of “AT-ONE-MENT”, and so to signify a bringing together of God and man, which is indeed an important part of the work of atonement. But the Hebrew word actually means “covering”: it is used to describe the way in which Noah covered his ark to secure it from the weather, “pitching it within and without with pitch” (Genesis 6:14).

And so the idea is that those who would come to God need to have their sin covered up, and to accept His righteousness. As David says, “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity” (Psalm 32:2 used by Paul in Romans 4:7).

No doubt the covering of the nakedness of our first parents with coats of skins has the same import.

We do not need further, at this stage, to discuss the significance of the various offerings. It is worth while noting again, however, how precise their requirements are, and how carefully they are expected to be obeyed. The place of worship must be constructed in the way in which God ordains (Exodus 25:40; Hebrews 8:5), unauthorised persons must not take part in the celebration of the ritual (2 Chronicles 26:16-21): those who were appointed must not go presumptuously or drunkenly into God’s presence (Leviticus 10:1-11). Materials appointed for the service of God must be used for the service of God alone, and any violation of this would be heavily punished (Exodus 30:23-38). All the ordinances of sacrifice emphasised the holiness of the Lord and the duty of humble obedience to Him.

* NOTE: Almost always in these letters, the quotations are given from the ordinary Bible, the “Authorised Version” of 1611, which is in everyone’s hands. Very rarely appeal will be made to the “Revised Version” of 1880 where some useful point is brought out by that translation. But the plain truths of the Bible are not a matter between one version and another. They can be clearly understood from any.

“I WILL BE SANCTIFIED IN THEM THAT COME NIGH ME”

There are several grim examples of the way in which violation of the commands of God was visited, some of which are to be found in the references above: Cain was rejected, Nadab and Abihu were slain by fire, Moses himself was forbidden to enter the land of promise because he had taken the credit to himself for a miracle performed by the power of God (Numbers 20:7-12), Uzziah the king was smitten with leprosy (as Miriam had been earlier for challenging the Lord's leader (Numbers 12:1-10), one who dared to touch the ark, to which he was not appointed, was smitten (2 Samuel 6:6-8).

We can approach these examples in such a way as to learn nothing from them. We can be critical of God, and presume to ask why these hard judgements were made, as though implying that they ought not to have been. Or we can, remembering that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (Romans 15:4; 1 Corinthians 10:11), seek humbly to learn the lesson which they teach, and know, in our own approach to God that “to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word” (Isaiah 66:2). Such a lesson will stand us in good stead when we find—as we shall—that the Scriptures call upon ourselves to be ready to take certain humble steps of obedience, and take them in the way provided.

There is an example of a gentler kind, of a heathen captain who suffered from leprosy, and sought the help of a prophet of God. As became a conqueror, he looked for a display in which he could appear the hero, forgetting that he was a leper coming to ask for a favour. The prophet declined to minister to his vanity, sent a servant to command him to dip seven times in Jordan, and remained at home. The enraged potentate was going away, a leper still, when his servants counselled him to the wiser course of obedience, and at the seventh dipping “his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child” (2 Kings 5). Our own condition is similar to this leper's, we are sinners without any human hope of bettering our situation, and we shall fare for better than Naaman might have done if we take his earlier course. We are sinners with a promise of redemption made us, which we are beginning to see, and readiness to obey the will of God will make the promise our own.

“THE LAMB OF GOD, WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD”

This is the goal to which all these sacrifices lead. They demand humility and obedience from the offerer: Some of them demand a very real trust in God on his part too, for the people were commanded that all their menfolk should go up three times in the year to the centre of God's worship, trusting in His care while their homes were unprotected (Exodus 34:23-24). But their principle significance lies in their prophecy. Blood-letting of animals would in itself get nowhere. It would show a right state of mind on the people's part, but it would accomplish nothing. “It is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4).

But a greater sacrifice does (in a way to be discussed) what these earlier ones failed to do. Jesus is the “Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Peter speaks of the disciple as having been redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19). The Letter to the Hebrews, after telling us what the blood of beasts could not accomplish, speaks of Jesus “offering one sacrifice for sins for ever” (Hebrews 10:12). The prophets of the Old Testament had spoken of His coming in similar terms (Isaiah 53:10; Daniel 9:24-27).

Thus we see in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, the first of three great themes which point forward to redemption in Christ Jesus. The other two will engage our attention immediately.

READING

Most of the appropriate reading has been indicated in the notes, but the following chapters can be singled out for special consideration. It is not impossible that the detail in some of them will be a little confusing . . . and that some of the matters treated will not, at this stage, be fully understood: In the light of what has been said, however, the general teaching of the passages will be plain, and we can defer detail until we have a better all round equipment for the purpose.

Genesis Chapter 4.

Exodus chapters 11, 12.

Leviticus chapters 10, 16, 17.

Isaiah chapter 53

Mark chapters 14 and 15

Hebrews chapters 9 and 10

A.D.N.

LETTER 6: “The promises to Abraham”

6. THE PROMISES TO ABRAHAM

THE SEED

This is the second of the great lines of prophecy which point forward to the work of Christ. It is introduced to us in the very passage which conveys the sad results of the Fall, in which the tempter is told, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed. It shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Genesis 3:15). The subjection of the woman and her race to sin should be broken when a child of hers should arise who should engage the power of sin afresh, and defeat it, wounding it mortally, though suffering hurt Himself in the process. Even now we shall no doubt be able to identify the occasion on which this was accomplished.

The word “seed” occurs for the first time here. The word is ordinary enough, meaning, in our common parlance, “offspring”, and capable, like the latter word, of referring to one child or to more. But it is impossible, in going on through the book of Genesis, not to recognise the very special use to which it is put.

After the Fall, as the world’s population grew in size and wickedness, God’s violent intervention in the Flood (Genesis 6) selected the family of Noah for preservation when the rest of mankind was destroyed. Noah’s descendants multiplied and re-peopled the earth, and relapsed into idolatry once more. From this world God selected one man, Abraham, and made him the bearer of His promise. Genesis 12 and onwards records the history of God’s dealings with him. What happened to him was, if we were to take no notice of the hand of God in it, local enough to seem of little importance. He left his native town of Ur of the Chaldees, and wandered up the Euphrates Valley and across to the West, entering the land which now we know as Palestine. Journeying for the remainder of his life between here and Egypt, he died a nomad. His son Isaac and his grandson Jacob lived similarly, but in the days of the last, the people descended from him began to take shape as a distinct nation: Under the leadership of Joseph, one of Jacob’s sons, seventy odd souls went to live in Egypt in time of famine, including Jacob himself, and the end of the book Genesis leaves them there.

But the hand of God is evidently there. God called Abraham to leave Ur, and led him “to a land that I will show thee” (12:1). In the course of his subsequent life, God made promises to him repeatedly, many of them centering in the “seed”, among which we may note the following:

1. “I will make of thee a great nation ... In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (12:2-3).
2. “The land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth” (13:14-17).
3. “Thou shalt be a father of many nations” (17:4).
4. “Thy seed shall possess the gate of His enemies, and in thy seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed (22:17-18).

Promises similar to these were repeated to Isaac and Jacob. How far were they fulfilled? So far as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob personally were concerned, they were not fulfilled at all, because they died and were buried in lands they did not possess. So far as their descendants were concerned, there was certainly some fulfilment, for the few who went down into Egypt in the time of Joseph were multiplied into a great company by the time, over two hundred years later, that the Book of Exodus takes up the story. The race which was delivered from the oppression of the Pharaoh and taken by Moses into Sinai, is actually described by Moses in the terms which God used to Abraham (Deuteronomy 1:10 and 10:22).

But this state of affairs did not last. Moses had warned the people that the continuance of God's favour to them depended on themselves, and if they should turn away from Him, their abundance would forsake them, and they would become a pitiful remnant (Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and 28:58-62), and we know from their later history (which we shall briefly consider shortly) and from their present condition, how bitterly this has been fulfilled. There is a very useful summary of their behaviour and their fate in Nehemiah 9:6-37, written after their first series of great calamities had come upon them.

As to the rest of the terms of the promises, they have hardly been fulfilled at all. No one would claim that all families of the earth have yet reaped any abiding blessing from Abraham, and his Child or children, and there is no sign in our present world of any special sense of gratitude to the Jewish race. It is not really true that any Jewish ruler has ever possessed "the gate of His enemies" in the way Abraham was promised.

If the promises of God are sure, therefore, practically everything remains to be fulfilled. We turn again, therefore, at this stage, to see what the New Testament has to say.

'THY SEED, WHICH IS CHRIST'

We find the same kind of things as we did when we discussed Sacrifice. One Person is pointed to as the source of all hope in connection with these promises. Before He was born, the mother of Jesus anticipated His coming as the fulfilment of the oath "to Abraham and his seed" (Luke 1:55). When He went about preaching, He told the Jews who trusted that they were the legitimate heirs of Abraham's promises, that it was to Himself that Abraham had looked forward. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (John 8:56). Much the same idea is contained in the words of Peter that "the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified His Son Jesus" (Acts 3:13). When Paul is discussing the promises made to Abraham and his Seed, he says expressly that the Seed is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

The promises which God gave are therefore to find their fulfilment in Jesus. But have they? Are we yet any better off in looking for the blessing on all nations, for the everlasting inheritance of the land by Abraham and his Seed, for the subjection of all enemies to Him?

The New Testament answer to all these questions is No. But the foundation has been laid. The work has been begun and will be accomplished. Take the promise: "Thy seed shall possess the gate of His enemies". In the days of His flesh, the enemies of Jesus seemed to triumph over Him, and they certainly crucified Him. He rose again, however, and ascended to heaven, and there He waits. A Psalm quoted in the New Testament more than once says of Him, "Sit thou at my right hand until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalm 110:1; Acts 2:34, 35; Hebrews 1:13). Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the task of suffering, will return to take up the task of subjecting the world to God.

This solves the question of the promises—made to Abraham personally, too. We have already said that he died without entering into possession. So Stephen says: “He gave him none inheritance in” the Land, “no, not so much as to set his foot on; yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession” (Acts 7:5), and so the Letter to the Hebrews: “These all died, in faith, not having received the promises” (Hebrews 11:13). But we have seen, too, that Jesus speaks of Abraham as looking forward to Himself, and this same letter to the Hebrews says so, too: “He looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (11:10). A dispute between Jesus and His enemies shows us what we are to expect: Jesus had plainly taught that there was to be a resurrection of the dead in the future and there were certain Jews, called Sadducees, who did not believe this. The problem with which they presented Him, and the way in which He answered it, are detailed in Matthew 22:23-32, and we are particularly interested in His statement that God, who called Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is not the God of the dead but of the living. These patriarchs are to be raised from the dead, at the time of Jesus’ coming, and will so inherit the fulfilment of the promises.

Therefore it is that Jesus can speak of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God of the future (Matthew 8:11, Luke 13:29).

“IF YE BE CHRIST’S THEN ARE YE ABRAHAM’S SEED”

There are two senses in which the promise that Abraham’s Seed shall be a blessing to all nations will be fulfilled. In the first place, there is the obvious one, that when Jesus Christ returns to the earth, the order which He will establish then will bring blessing to the whole world. In the second, there is the plain teaching of the New Testament that the children of Abraham, who therefore share the promises, are not to be restricted to natural Jews only. In the very early days, when John was telling of the coming of Jesus, the Jews were warned that they must not trust in their descent from Abraham, for “God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matthew 3:9). Jesus warned them, similarly, that fleshly descent was of no avail if they did not live after the spirit of their great ancestor, and told them pointedly, “Ye are of your father the devil” (John 8:33-34).

He told them further that God would cause the hope of the gospel to be shared by many who should come “from the east and the west and sit down with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the Kingdom of God”, in the passages already quoted, and there are frequent indications in the Gospels of a wider purpose with men and women of all nations. (See John 10:16; Luke 24:47; Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15).

Paul takes up these promises and expounds them as a general principle. The great characteristic of Abraham, to which the records of his life in Genesis bear witness, is his faith—the fact that he was prepared to go where God directed, and to do as God required, “He believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness” is the key verse (Genesis 15:1-6), and is repeatedly used in the New Testament (Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). It is this faith which marks out a righteous man in God’s eyes. No amount of good works will do, because we are all

sinner, but to trust in God and seek in such a spirit to do as He wishes—this is to receive His seal of righteousness.

And this is open to Jew and Gentile alike. The 4th chapter of Romans brings this out, and says that the title “Father of many nations” receives its fulfilment in the men and women of all races who follow Abraham’s example (verse 17). Galatians 3 makes the same point. Those who trust in what God has done through Jesus are adopted into Him, and are recognised as part of the Seed of Abraham and therefore, “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:26-29).

It would be wrong, of course, to apply this promise universally to everyone. There are no exceptions to it, in the sense that each one, of whatever race, can take advantage of the offer which he hears to take part in it. But he must take that step. The chapter just referred to speaks of a rite of admission which has been hinted at before, and makes it a condition of becoming “Abraham’s seed”, or remaining outside, in sin and death.

THE JEWISH RACE

It is this relationship to the promises through Jesus, which gives point to His statement, “Salvation is of the Jews” (John 4:22): It is everywhere recognised in the Bible that the Jews had the peculiar privilege of being the custodians of God’s promises, both in the written word, and in enshrining the heritage of the Son of God (Romans 3:1-2 and 9:4-5): It is true that the promises of abundance given to them in the Old Testament were conditional, and their failure to play their part led to them being for the time withdrawn. It is true that they rejected their opportunity of accepting Jesus when He came, and were themselves turned away in consequence (Romans 10). For Jews now there is the same hope of salvation, and only the same, as that available for Gentiles: “We believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, even as they” (Acts 15:11).

But as the Jews have been the custodians of God’s word, so they are to the world the witnesses of His truth. Their very sufferings bear testimony to the inerrancy of His judgements. And they must return. Their desolations must have an end, and a chastened and repentant people be restored to their land. The evidence for this will be dealt with immediately when we come to the third of the Old Testament themes which points forward to Christ—the Kingdom of God.

READING: Most of the book of Genesis, from chapter 12, should be read, with the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus, and all the passages which have been referred to in this letter. Romans 3 and 4, which have already been read, should now have a fuller meaning and should be read through again, and it will be well also to include chapters 9,10 and 11 of this Letter. Galatians 3 is important, too.

LETTER 7: "The Kingdom of God".

7. THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We must sum up very briefly the history of Bible times from Abraham onward, so as to set the stage for this last great theme. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who were the principal figures in the last letter, were the founders of the nation of Israel, a race specially marked out from the nations around them as being in close relationship with the true God of heaven, when the rest of the world was given over to the worship of idols. The nation dates its beginning as a conscious unity from the time of Jacob and his twelve sons, and takes its name, Israel, from the new name given to this man (Genesis 32:28 and 35:10).

About seventy people went down into Egypt in Jacob's old age, guided and directed by Joseph, one of his sons. After the death of Jacob and Joseph, the new ruler of the country was not so well disposed to the people, and a time of tribulation arose for them, from which they were only delivered when God led them out of Egypt by the hand of Moses (Exodus, chapters 1 to 12). Once outside the land, the people were led to the wilderness of Sinai, and from Mount Sinai God gave them the system of law (of which the well-known Ten Commandments' are only a small part, and the laws of sacrifice to which we have already referred are another) which now we know as the Law of Moses. Large parts of the remaining Books of Moses are devoted to detailing these laws.

After much wandering, caused by their unwillingness to trust God when He bade them enter the land of Canaan (Numbers 13), the people did arrive at the borders of the Promised Land and were led over Jordan by Joshua (Joshua chapters 1 to 3). They had been commanded to exterminate the evil nations who dwelled in the land (Deuteronomy 7:1-8), but in fact they only partly responded to this injunction, and their disobedience led them into all the troubles which Moses had said it would.

For some time, they lived in Canaan, ruled over by judges who were sometimes God-fearing, but very often not, and the evil condition of the people in those days is well summed up in the words of the Book of Judges itself: "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (21:25). In the days of the last and greatest of the Judges, Samuel, however, the people decided that they wished to have a king like the nations around them (1 Samuel 8) and were given Saul. His dynasty ended with his death at the hands of the Philistines, his people's enemies who dwelled in the coastal strip of Palestine, and David succeeded him.

With the name of David we shall have much more to do, but we leave him for the present to complete our survey. He was succeeded as king by his son, Solomon, and he by his son Rehoboam. At this point, however, the nation divides into two. One part, the greatest, is ruled over by a rebel named Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:20) and then by a succession of evil rulers of

many separate dynasties. The other, known from now on as Judah, remains loyal to the house of David for the remainder of its history as a kingdom.

Each part in turn collapses, however. The larger and northern first at the hands of the empire of Assyria, the southern afterwards at the hands of Babylon. The last king of the house of David is deposed and blinded.

Thus is summarised the history of the Old Testament as far as the end of 2 Chronicles. Much of this period is covered, too, by the prophets (from Isaiah onwards in our Bibles) who spoke the word of God during the reigns of the kings. There was a fairly small-scale return to Palestine about 70 years after the last overthrow of Judah (recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah) and the Old Testament leaves us with a picture of a few Jews in Palestine awaiting the New Testament's story of the coming of Jesus. After Jesus was born there was only about 70 years further tenancy of the land for them, for in A.D. 70 the Romans destroyed their city and their new Temple, and scattered them as slaves throughout their empire. In A.D. 160 Jews were forbidden to dwell in the land, and from that time to our own century they have been strangers throughout the world.

This is, briefly, the history presented as a human story. But from what we have already said, it will be quite plain that it is not merely a human story. Abraham was called by God and guided by Him; the people of Israel who followed Moses out of Egypt were delivered by God, and at Sinai they received His laws. And it is there that God calls them "a Kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:6).

The Israelites were the people of God, and whatever earthly ruler they might have, God was to be their King. If they wish to have a man visibly ruling over them, then it will be his duty to study diligently the Law of God, and rule the people justly, as God's viceroy (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). When settled in the land, they do so decide, God reads rightly the spirit of their decision, and says, "They have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

Yet they remain responsible to God still, and God chooses for them the House of David: The kingdom remains the Kingdom of God (1 Chronicles 28:5 and 29:11).

As such, it has a peculiar responsibility to God. As a prophet said later: "You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Plain alternatives had been put before the people, as in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, of obedience and prosperity, or disobedience and desolation, and the later records are full of the warnings of the prophets as to what will come upon them for their rebellion (see 2 Chronicles 36:14-21). In the reign of the last king of Judah, Zedekiah, the greatest judgments of God were poured out, the Kingdom of God was overturned (Ezekiel 21:25-27).

“UNTIL HE COME WHOSE RIGHT IT IS”

But this overthrowing was not the end. In the very act of pronouncing it, God speaks of One who shall come “Whose right it is” and restore the Kingdom, and we must go back to David to learn a little more about Him. The passage we come to is interesting too, from its introduction of the word “Seed” again. Speaking to David of the events which would happen after his death, the prophet Nathan says: “When thy days be fulfilled and thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, I will set up thy Seed after thee ... and I will establish His kingdom. He shall build an house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. I will be His Father and He shall be My Son” (2 Samuel 7:12-16, see 1 Chronicles 17:11-15). There is a strong resemblance between this promise and some of those to Abraham (dealt with in the last letter): a child to arise after the parent’s death, to set up a kingdom, and yet to be seen by the parent: “Thy house and thy kingdom shall be established for ever before thee” (2 Samuel 7:16).

The prophets are continually repeating this promise in various forms. See Isaiah 9:6-7 and chapters 11 and 32; Jeremiah 23:1-8 and chapter 33. It is quite clear on the face of it that such a One must be the same as the Seed of Abraham who shall “possess the gate of His enemies”, and we are not therefore surprised when, on turning to the New Testament, we find Jesus Christ repeatedly referred to as the Son of David, whose lot it will be to set up his kingdom and sit upon his throne. We are not surprised to find that the burden of His message is the “gospel of the Kingdom of God”.

Thus, the angel foretelling His birth says, “The Lord God shall give unto Him the throne of His father David” (Luke 1:32). the list of His ancestors in Matthew calls Him “The Son of David, the Son of Abraham” (Matthew 1:1); as though to relate Him at once to the promises of the Seed and the King of which we have spoken). His birth took place at Bethlehem, David’s city, and people were not slow to see the significance of the fact (Matthew 2:1-6; Micah 5:2; 1 Samuel 16:1-13). They called Him “the Christ”, and “the Christ” meant “the Anointed One”, the heir-apparent to the throne, and when Jesus asked His enemies “What think ye of Christ, whose son is He?” they had no difficulty in answering, “The Son of David” (Matthew 22:42-45).

The title was given Him by His disciples, Andrew said “We have found the Messiah (which is, being interpreted, the Christ)” (John 1:41). Nathaniel said, “Thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel” (verse 49). Peter said, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God” (Matthew 16:16).

THE KING OF THE JEWS

They had been expecting Him. There was an air of expectancy about at the time when He came (e.g. John 1:19-28; Matthew 2:1-6). Their prophets had spoken of Him long before and one in particular of them had fixed a time which was at the point of fulfilment: (Daniel 9:24-27). When He set about His work, there was more than one attempt to force the Kingdom upon Him

(John 6:15; Mark 11:7-10), and anxious questionings and doublings when He seemed in no hurry to do as they wished (Matthew 16:21-26; Luke 17:20).

The reason for this we will consider presently, but there is no doubt that Jesus renounced all intention of setting up the Kingdom then by force (John 18:36), that His disciples lost faith in Him on this account for a time (Luke 24:13-21), that His enemies had Him done to death, and mocked Him with the title “King of the Jews” as He hung upon the cross (Mark 15:18-26,32).

We are brought to the same situation as we were with the promises to Abraham: that they have not been fulfilled yet, and if they are to be—as they must since they are God’s—Jesus himself must return to do it. And of course there are countless indications that He will. The detailed evidence for this will be given in one of the remaining letters, but, since we are thinking especially at the moment of the Return of Jesus in relation to the Kingdom of God, it will be well to turn to the narrative in Acts 1, where Jesus is just about to leave the earth for heaven. To the disciples’ question about the establishment of the kingdom, He answers only, “It is not for you to know the times and the seasons”, and yet, as He leaves them, the angels standing by comfort them with the assurance: “This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into Heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into Heaven” (verses 7 and 11).

The second coming to establish the Kingdom is therefore sure, and a parable which Jesus Himself spoke to those who were expecting it too soon, conveys the same plain meaning (Luke 19:11-27).

BIBLE - THE CITIZENS OF THE KINGDOM

Although the Kingdom of God does not now exist in power upon the earth, the heirs of the Kingdom are being prepared. Israel was to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6), but Israel failed of its tasks. When Jesus spoke to His rebellious fellow-countrymen, He warned them, “The Kingdom shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matthew 21:43). Those, therefore, who obey Jesus now as their king are spoken of by Peter as “a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9), just as Israel were before. Such servants are subjects of Christ’s Kingdom in exile, having in hope and promise a Kingdom which cannot be moved (Hebrews 12:28), and looking for the time when their King shall appear in glory.

It will be seen that the Bible teaching about the Kingdom of God differs fundamentally from many current ideas. It is not heaven (though the King is at present in Heaven, “sat down at the right hand of God, from henceforth expecting till His enemies be made His footstool”—Hebrews 1:8,13 and 10:12-13). It is not any existing church or federation of churches (though the gospel of the Kingdom is preached now, and those who receive it are heirs). It is not primarily a condition of things in the hearts of those who believe (though these must certainly be dedicated to God as His proper territory, and He has promised the blessing of His presence to those who trust and obey Him—John 14:23). It is a real rulership of God upon

the earth, which has existed in limited measure already, and which will exist in its fulness when Christ upon the earth shall have accomplished the work of God.

For the Kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever (Daniel 2:44).

READING

This has again been mainly indicated in the note. It would be well to read in addition Daniel 2 (to show how the kingdoms of the world will be replaced by that of God). Psalm 72 (for a picture of the restored Kingdom in its glory), and Matthew 25 (for the circumstances attending the return of Jesus to establish it).

A.D.N.

LETTER 8: The Life of Jesus.

8. THE LIFE OF JESUS

In the letters which have preceded this, we have learned a good deal about Jesus. Quite apart from the evidence that He rose from the dead (which occupied letter 3), all the steps we have taken have obviously had Him as their goal. It is His authority which gives the seal to the authority of the Bible as a whole. It is to Him that the sacrifices of the Law pointed forward, it is to Him that Abraham and the faithful men who followed looked when the promise of the Seed was given to them; it is to Him that kings and prophets look, as the King of the house of David Who shall reign over all the world.

The purpose of God centres in Him, and so the path we have pursued could not have been other than it was. We have come to know that Jesus was in the line of descent from Abraham and David, that God was to be His Father, that He should in some way offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice for sin, and become the Saviour of all who trust in Him, and that He must return from His present sojourn in heaven to overthrow the power of evil in the world, to restore the fallen fortunes of His nation, and to raise from the dead those who have received the promises of God.

But it is obviously not enough. We have the records of Jesus' life and work, of His death and resurrection, in the Gospels, and we have divine comment upon them all in the letters which follow. It must be our present pleasure to deal with these: to see His life as a whole as it is written, to hear from His own lips the commandments of God, and to ask Himself what He would have us to do. Such an investigation will gather into itself much of what has gone before, but it will also teach us much that is new.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

The records of this are in Matthew 1:18; 2:11, and Luke 1:26, 27; 2:40. In both of these it is expressly stated that it was a Virgin Birth; that Mary a woman of our human race was His mother, while God, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, was His Father. Such a miracle must have the very highest significance, which we must try, however humbly, to understand. It is not a doctrine which we can accept or reject as we choose, but one which lies at the very heart of God's work of redemption. Such passages as the well-known, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son" (John 3:16), depend on it for their meaning. Statements such as that He was "In the form of God" (Philippians 2:6), and "the express image of His person" (Hebrews 1:3), are only true because, in some way, the likeness of God was stamped upon Him by the circumstances of His birth.

Something we learned quite early will help us to start. Adam was made "in the image of God", but Adam fell and the image was debased. Jesus, as the Philippians passage says, was "in the form of God", and there can be no doubt, from reading the section (Philippians 2:5-11), that it is Paul's intention to compare Jesus and Adam together. Adam did think it a thing to be grasped at to be equal with God, and, grasping, was lost. Jesus, notwithstanding His high parentage, did not grasp at equality with God. His life was a life of humble service to the Father's will, and where Adam had been puffed up with ambition, Jesus "emptied Himself" and was "meek and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). We showed how Adam followed his own will and rejected God's: the hallmark of Jesus is that He overcame human desire and devoted His whole life to glorifying God. We shall refer to repeated examples of this.

Since, then, no human sin or folly disfigured Him, it was possible for Him to show forth without taint the glory and the qualities of God, who was His Father. Therefore John can say of Him, "No man hath seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him". (John 1:18), and Jesus can say of Himself, "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father. If ye had known Me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 14:7, 9). The apostles use similar words of Him, when they speak of the disciples as seeing "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ", and call Him "the image of the invisible God" (2 Corinthians 4:6: Colossians 1:15).

And so, when we are told that God, Who formerly spoke through the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us in His Son (Hebrews 1:1,2) we sense a great change—a change in intimacy. Formerly, the prophets declared what God said, now Jesus Christ, the Son of God, shows what He is like. We, who could never have looked upon the face of the Majesty in heaven, "dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto, whom no man hath seen nor can see" (1 Timothy 6:16), have been permitted to know Him in the person of His Son.

This truth demands the doctrine of the Virgin Birth. It is important, however, to see a distinction between what we have shown, and the doctrine commonly known as the doctrine of the Trinity. According to the latter, the Incarnation took place when "God the Son took flesh in the Virgin's Womb" and became man. According to the Scripture, the Son of God was born as

a man, when the Holy spirit had operated from the Father to give conception to Mary. The Scriptures show Jesus as the manifestation of God in His Son, the doctrine we have mentioned submits that He is the manifestation of God the Son in Flesh. The distinction is important, because the true doctrine leaves room for our next point, the manhood of Jesus, while the false is embarrassed by a subtle doctrine of “two natures”, which makes His temptations unreal and His sinlessness inevitable.

THE TEMPTATIONS AND SINLESSNESS OF JESUS

Whatever the Virgin Birth implies, it leaves Jesus with all the qualities of a man. The title by which He most often chose to be known was “Son of man”, and every episode of His life brings out His fellow-feeling with those among whom He walked. We pass over the brief narratives of His early life (Luke 2:40-52), noticing only the evidence in this delightful story that His Father—His true Father, not Joseph—was already undertaking His education, and giving Him that knowledge which should cause men to wonder and say, “Whence hath this man this wisdom?” (Matthew 13:53-58), to which His answer would have been, “I speak that which I have seen with my Father” (John 8:28, 38). In whatever circumstances Jesus found Himself, we can be sure that He had the knowledge to deal with it, the question with which He was confronted was always, to what use He should put His knowledge and His power.

The first temptation in His manhood came when, at about 30, He went to be baptised at Jordan by His cousin John, as recorded in Matthew 3. Baptism has been mentioned once or twice already, and this record gives us the opportunity of knowing more about it. The people who came to John confessed their sins, and if he felt any doubt about the reality of their repentance, he had no hesitation in asking them to produce proof. That done, they went into the river and were covered with its waters, and came out pledged to a new life in service to God. There will be more to say of repentance and baptism later. But here we note that John was aghast at the idea of Jesus coming to baptism. His baptism was for sinners, and he knew that Jesus was not a sinner, like the other people who came to his baptism. “Master, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?” He had rightly estimated their relative positions, but wrongly understood the nature of Jesus’ work. Never do we find Jesus presuming upon His righteousness: always do we see Him ready to humble Himself and obey, and in the wonder of the humility of His reply to John, we see the whole spirit of an acceptable approach to God: “Suffer it to be so now, forth us it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness”.

Immediately upon this there follow the Temptations in the Wilderness, and in this connection we are introduced for the first time in this study to the subject of the Devil. After his baptism, Jesus is submitted to three trials, and the record says that the Devil was the agent. We can learn much about this devil from a careful consideration of them. The first temptation is to satisfy His hunger, by using the great power which God had given Him to turn stones into bread. He refused, giving as His reason, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 8:3). His work was not to use His special powers to gratify Himself, but to glorify God, and therefore the Man who was

willing to provide food for five thousand and four thousand when they were hungry, would not do so for Himself.

The second temptation is to throw Himself from a pinnacle of the Temple, relying on angelic protection. Certainly He could have done it, and it would have won Him great fame before the people. But again the Scriptures defeated the devil, and with “thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Matthew 4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16), He declined to test the powers of which He was quite sure, and refused to work wonders on His own behalf. But the temptation was in the wilderness, from which Jesus did not return, until it was; over (see Luke 4:14), and there is no Temple in the Wilderness. Must we not therefore conclude that the temptation was a thought which suggested itself to Jesus, that He should go and do this, and that there was no devil other than the prompting of sin?

The third temptation makes this clearer yet, for when the devil taketh Him into an exceeding high mountain from which He can see all the kingdoms of the world, and offers them at the price of worshipping him, there are two problems which no theory of a personal devil can solve. There is no mountain, in the wilderness or anywhere else, which affords such a view, and there could be no power, human or devilish, which could exchange the kingdoms of the world for worship. The temptation must have come from within (as all temptations do: James 1:14), and only Jesus Himself could have had the power to undertake that awful disobedience.

In a later temptation. He confessed to the power to summon more than twelve legions of angels to His defence (Matthew 26:53), and we miss the point of much of the temptation of Jesus unless we realize the opportunities which were His to misuse the power given to Him. But in His reply to this temptation He stated the guiding principle: “Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve” (Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13). He was to make similar statements more than once throughout His earthly career. “My meat, is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work” (John 4:34). “I do always those things which please Him” (John 8:29). We can trace His response to this principle in all His actions. Even goodness He would not claim in His own right, for “there is none good but one, that is God” (Matthew 19:17), and He knew “UNDERSTANDING” that righteousness consists in doing God’s pleasure, not in priding oneself on one’s own achievements. He knew that it was not possible for any man to accumulate a reserve of good works and show a profit to God: “Ye, when ye have done all those things, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants, we have done that which was our duty to do’” (Luke 17:7-10).

It is impossible now to go into the details of His other temptations, but these first three provide the key to the whole, and show us the principle upon which He worked. The resisted temptation to throw Himself from the pinnacle of the Temple bore fruit when His enemies led Him to the brow of a hill to cast Him down, and He was content with slipping quietly away from them (Luke 4:29-30). The resisted temptation to take the kingdoms of the world in the wrong way, bore fruit when Peter, having confessed Him to be King, strove to stop Him going to be crucified (Matthew 16:21-23). The resisted temptation to satisfy Himself with the power of the Spirit of God was constantly manifest in every act of kindness and sympathy with which He

considered others, while “the foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath no where to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20).

In the life of Jesus, the command “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Matthew 19:19 and 22:39, Leviticus 19:18), did not mean merely, as so often now we water it down to mean, “Do unto your neighbour as you would have him do to you”, but “Do unto your neighbour as selfishness makes you want to do unto yourself”—treat him as though he were you.

In all His life, therefore, it is written of Jesus that He did no wrong. He could claim for Himself “Which of you convinceth me of sin?” (John 8:46), and the trivial nature of the evidence which they brought against Him at His trial shows how well-grounded His confidence was (see Matthew 26:59-62; Mark 14:55-60; John 18:28). The Apostles’ verdict on His life afterwards is, “He did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth”. “He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin” (1 Peter 2:22-23; Hebrews 4:15). And we have seen that His sinlessness consisted, not merely in the fact that He did nothing wrong, but that He did the right things in the right spirit of humble association with the will of God. “He committed Himself unto Him that judgeth righteously”.

At no point is this more fully illustrated than at the time of His death. This marks the climax of His obedience, and a critical point of the purpose of God in Him. This will be the solemn subject of the next letter.

The Gospels are our field for this lesson, and there is nothing in them which does not bear on its subject. The best course will be to take one Gospel, say that of Mark, which is the shortest, and read it through, with the following chapters from other Gospels:

READING

Matthew—chapters 3, 4

Luke—chapters 10, 15, 16, 17

John—chapters 3,4

A.D.N.

LETTER 9: The death of Jesus

9. THE DEATH OF JESUS

We can summarise the circumstances of this very briefly. Entering Jerusalem in His last open triumph (Mark 11:8-11), (which shows again how the people thought of the Kingdom of God as the restoration of the Kingdom of David, and still looked to Him to fulfil their hopes) Jesus behaves very differently from the King they would have liked.

Gathering His disciples, He gives them a detailed and gloomy prophecy of the impending desolation of their city and the scattering of its inhabitants (Mark 13:2-23). Making detailed arrangements with them for the celebration of a last meal together, He uses the occasion to take bread from the table, bless and break it, and say, "Take, eat: this is my body", and to take a cup of wine, bless and distribute it, and add, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for many" (Mark 14:22-25). This done, He leads them from the supper-room to the Garden of Gethsemane at the foot of the Mount of Olives, leaves all save three of them behind, and then, separating even from them, falls down and prays, "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee, take away this cup from me: nevertheless, not what I will, but what thou wilt". (Mark 14:36; Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42).

Strengthened by an angel from heaven (Luke 22:43), He awakens His sleeping followers, and goes out to meet His captors led by the betrayer Judas. Refusing the offer of force which Peter makes, and severely rebuking the attempt to shed blood in His defence (Matthew 26:52), He permits Himself to be led away to trial.

Before the Jews after much false witness has broken down, He is condemned on a charge of blasphemy, because He admits the title of "The Christ, the Son of the Blessed" (Mark 14:61).

But this purely religious charge is of no interest to the Romans, who alone have the power to execute a death sentence. that the rulers frighten Pontius Pilate into accepting a charge of treason, because Jesus, as King of the Jews, must needs be a leader of sedition against Caesar (John 19:12-16). After suffering many indignities, including scourging and royal mockery, He is led away to be crucified.

And there, between two wrongdoers, they do Him to death. No word of complaint escapes His lips. Those who call cat-calls at Him receive from Him only the plea for forgiveness, "For they know not what they do". His head remains erect, through all His sufferings, and He declines the offered opiate of His pain. Only when His throat is so parched that He cannot speak the words with which this part of His work shall be closed, does He confess, "I thirst", and receiving the sour wine, cry with a loud voice, "It is finished". Only then does He bow His head, and die.

They take the body of the Lord from the Cross and lay it in a new tomb. They close the tomb with a heavy stone, and seal it against all interference, setting a guard against it to make it doubly sure (Matthew 27:57-66). There, to all human appearances, the episode ends.

THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

Whatever this death of Christ means, it lies at the heart of Christianity. "I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified", and "The preaching of the Cross is the power of God" (1 Corinthians 1:18 and 2:2): these show Paul's estimate of its importance.

The fact we have noted much earlier, that the death of Christ is given an enormous space in the records of the Gospels, goes to show the same.

What is this importance? We will illustrate it with three passages. The first has already appeared in this letter, as the cry of Jesus in the Garden to the Father: “Not my will, but thine be done”. The second is the Apostle Paul’s summary of His death: “Being in the form of God, He thought it not a thing to be grasped to be equal with God, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”. (Philippians 2:6-8, partly from R.V. and R.V. margin). The third is a saying of Jesus Himself about His death, when He had told His disciples that He was to go and be crucified, and then added the exhortation, “If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me”. (Matthew 16:24).

The first of these takes us forward from what we had already discovered about the work of Jesus. His constant determination to do the will of God, and His refusal to take credit to Himself, even to the title of “Good”, find their culmination here. We have already branded the flesh which we bear as being the seat of self-will in its battle against God. As long as that power exists undefeated, the possibility of rebellion against God will exist. And Jesus was of our flesh (Romans 1:3; 8:3), and as the latter passage shows, His death was in a very real sense the condemnation of sin. There was nothing beautiful, or worldly glorious, about the death of the Cross: it puts to shame that which hung there. “Not my will, but thine, be done” is taken now to the lengths of offering to God the very source of self-will. With the giving up of His life—the willing giving up—there was nothing now which could possibly exist to separate Jesus and His Father.

At this point the second passage takes up the story. A deliberate contrast is implied here between two men made in the image of God. The first was Adam, who did consider it a thing to grasp to be equal with God, and, filled with pride, became the author of sin and death in his disobedience. The second was Christ, Who, so nearly related to God in the manner of His birth, emptied Himself where Adam had puffed himself up, became obedient where the former had become disobedient, and gave Himself to death.

The third passage extends the importance of this beyond Jesus to all who would be His disciples. A picture is drawn: a picture of a leader carrying a cross, and a group of followers going after Him, carrying crosses also. And together they are transfixed upon their crosses. Where Paul says that Jesus “emptied Himself”, Jesus says that the disciples must “deny themselves”, and the meaning is the same. It is not expected of the followers of Jesus that they shall be literally done to death upon crosses. It is, however, that they will perform that act of submission, of faith, and of repentance which we know as baptism, and which will be more fully expounded shortly.

The lesson on which we have insisted so strongly before, is thus driven home here beyond question. The Cross is necessary because of what we are: of what our race as a whole became when Adam chose his own way rather than the way of God. It is necessary as demonstrating the kind of life which alone God can approve: the life of entire submission to His will, even to the

humbling to death of the flesh. It is necessary so as to convince us that “in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18). It is necessary as compelling us to look away from ourselves for our salvation, and put our trust in God.

THE CROSS AND THE CHARACTER OF GOD

So far, the Cross has been considered chiefly in relation to man. The sufferings of Jesus and His temptations and sinlessness have been considered as those of a Man who “was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin”. But as soon as we began to consider His life, we recognised that there were two aspects to be considered—that He was Son of man and Son of God. The expression “being in the form of God” (Philippians 2:6) tells us, not only that Jesus was like God in the dignity which was given Him, but that He had the opportunity of displaying God to the world. If He had sinned, the image of God would have been defaced as it was in Adam; since He did not. He showed God to the world in the way in which He could be understood, in the person of a Man Who could be seen, and heard, and Who could be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

The Scriptures therefore often speak of Jesus as the embodiment of the purpose, the character and the love of God. He Himself says, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9 and 12:45), and there are many other expressions in the New Testament showing that what Jesus was and did was the supreme revelation of God (e.g. Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3; 2 Corinthians 4:4-6). The whole counsel was of God, and without Him it could not have been accomplished. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish” (John 3:16). “God hath commended His love toward us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). “God hath set forth” Jesus Christ “to be a propitiation, through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins” (Romans 3:25).

The Cross is the assurance of God’s working for the salvation of men, when no salvation could otherwise occur. It is the most expressive picture of the self-giving of God which the human mind can understand, for it shows us the Father offering that which is dearest to Him and giving His Son for the life of the world.

The whole Bible teaching about the death of Jesus, rebels against the stupid theory that Jesus died “to placate the wrath of an angry deity”. There is, as we have shown, a proper place in the Bible for the wrath of God: it must fall, from His very character, upon the race which has sinned. But the wrath is neither bad-temper nor spite, but a proper consequence of His righteousness. And it does not lead God to demand that someone shall shed His blood as a price whereby His wrath shall be turned away. The very reverse is true, because God Himself has provided the offering, and paid the price whereby the salvation can be assured. “God commended His love”. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

If the wrath of God which falls upon sin was to be turned away, it must be done by the work of God Himself. It was God who set Jesus forth. No mere man living a righteous life in his own strength, even if this were possible for him to do, would have done what Jesus did for us. The very perfection of Jesus consisted in the flawlessness with which He showed that the credit and the glory go to His Father. God's strength was made perfect in the weakness of a man, and the angel from heaven who came from God to strengthen Jesus in His agony in the garden is the most touching illustration of the entire dependence which Jesus always acknowledged.

That Jesus's work did succeed in turning away the wrath of God is plain Scriptural teaching, however, and it has been well observed that the truth of Jesus's showing forth the love of God is only treated with such coldness in the world at large because it has not been realised how real is that wrath under which our sinful natures laboured. If we were more conscious of sin and the wrath it brings, we should be readier for love and the righteousness It offers. (See Ephesians 2:11-18; John 3:35-36; Romans 5:9-10).

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD

We can look upon the work of Jesus in another way. The sentence which was passed upon our race in its sin, was a just sentence. Humanly speaking, there is no remedy to the situation in which we find ourselves. God cannot become unjust in forgiving our sins, and giving life where justice demands death. All the sacrificial system of the Law (see Letter 5) enforced the lesson that We deserve the death which will come to us. The problem of the Atonement is, therefore, how God can be just, and still give righteousness and life to members of our fallen race. It is just this which, as Paul writes, the work of Jesus accomplished: "That He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:26).

The work of Jesus showed plainly what the flesh deserves It showed plainly the kind of righteousness which alone is righteous—the entire submission of all to the will of God. It showed how in the face of such submission, God could accept the One who made it, and glorify Him (as we shall see immediately).

It set the stage for the "righteousness of faith", as opposed to the "righteousness of the Law". In the latter, our sins condemn us, and there is none righteous. The former has a different basis. Taking the example of Abraham which we have met before (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-5; Galatians 3:6), Pauls show that real righteousness does consist of trust in God, in believing what He says, and going the way of His commandments. This is what Jesus did without failure. Abraham's acts of faith in going out to a country which he knew not, and believing in the promise of a great multitude of children when there was no human likelihood of his having a child, and looking constantly forward to a "City which hath foundations whose builder and maker it God" (Hebrews 11:8-10), were of the same kind.

Righteousness, real righteousness, consists not in adding up the good things we do which always leaves us with a deficit, and is in any case the sin of pride, but in trusting in God and walking in the way of His promises. Looking at the bright vision ahead, Abraham went into

exile. “For the joy that was set before Him” Jesus “endured the Cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2). Seeing the work of God in Jesus, assenting to Its implications and , trusting in its purpose, the disciple of Christ who is baptised Into Christ follows in the same tradition, and his faith is reckoned unto him also for righteousness.

THE DEATH OF JESUS AS A SACRIFICE

We have said before that the death of animals pointed forward to the death of Jesus and the shedding of their blood to the shedding of His. It has been emphasised that these sacrifices of animals were in themselves useless, and served only to point to the greater sacrifice. In this letter we have tried to see something of what that sacrifice involves.

But we shall now find repeatedly in the New Testament expressions which look back to the long series of types which went before the death of Jesus, and compare His death with theirs. When we read, therefore, that we have been redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:19), we shall understand that this comparison is being made, when we hear of being “Sprinkled with the blood of Christ” (Hebrews 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2), we shall know that our association with the work of Jesus is being compared with the cleansings associated with the animal sacrifices under the Law of Moses. In examples too numerous to mention we shall see the proofs of what we said before, that the ordinances of the Old Testament pointed forward to their own fulfilment in the New. One figure we might comment on a little further. On the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), the High Priest of Israel, having shed the blood of animals, entered into the presence of God Himself in the Most Holy Place, so making atonement for the sins of the people. Hebrews tells us that this figure, so imperfect in itself that it had to be repeated every year, points to two aspects of the work of Jesus. The slaying of the animal typified the slaying of Jesus Himself as a condition of acceptable approach into the presence of God. But the entry into the Most Holy Place typified Jesus also, the offering over, going into “the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:12-24). His death opened the way for something else, without which It would not have been complete. The work of Jesus did not finish with His crucifixion, either for Himself or for those who obey Him. With this point we proceed in the next letter.

READING

There is a wide range of reading connected with this subject. Almost everywhere we turn we encounter it, and the references in the notes will give some idea how vast it is. The following chapters should be specially read.

Mark—chapters 11 to 18 (and corresponding records in other Gospels).

John—chapter 3

Philippians—chapter 2

Romans—chapters 3 to 6

Hebrews—chapters 9 to 11

Ephesians—chapter 2

10. THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

If it is true that the Cross lies at the very heart of the Christian gospel of salvation, it is no less true that the Resurrection gives the heart its pulse of life. To be satisfied with the moral teaching of Jesus without the Cross is to be gravely mistaken but the mistake is no greater than to be satisfied with the Cross without the Resurrection. With either error, the gospel has been deprived of its power, for the former ignores the reality of sin and the need for Atonement, while the latter assures us of Sin and denies us Redemption.

That Jesus should have come bodily out of the tomb after the life He lived, is as significant as that Adam should have been condemned to enter it after his sin. As the presumption of Adam led him to estrangement from God, and to death, so the entire submission of Jesus to the will of God made it possible for God to work His good will upon Him, and restore Him to life. So Peter expresses it, when he said, "God hath raised (Him) up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be holden of it" (Acts 2:24), giving as the reason the Psalm which speaks of Him as having the Lord always before Him (Psalm 16:8). So Paul concludes in a passage we have used before, when he says that, because Jesus was obedient to the death of the Cross, "God also hath highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:9-11). Jesus appealed "with strong crying and tears unto Him that was able to save Him from death, and was heard in that He feared" (Hebrews 5:7). He Himself taught His disciples how necessary it was that His glory should come after, and in consequence of, His sufferings (Luke 24:25-27, compare 1 Peter 1:11).

The Resurrection proved, therefore, that Jesus had lived a life altogether acceptable to God, and had given Himself wholly to His Service. It proved the power of the Gospel, too, for those who taunted Him upon the Cross—"He saved others, Himself He cannot save" (Mark 15:31)—were answered now. Before His death, Jesus had assured them, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father" (John 10:17-18), and those who had marvelled uncomprehendingly when He spoke of dying, and rising again the third day (Mark 8:31 and 10:33-34) were now persuaded of the truth and significance of what they had heard (Luke 24:7-8, Acts 10:40).

Jesus was all He had claimed to be. The generation which crucified Him might reject the "sign of the prophet Jonas" which he offered them (Luke 11:29-32), but His disciples accepted it and proclaimed that He was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). When Paul was persuaded of the truth of the Resurrection by the appearance of Jesus, "straightway he preached Christ in the

synagogue, that He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). And Jesus could do all that he had said He would: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth” (Matthew 28:18). “I am He that liveth and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen, and I have the keys of hell and of death” (Revelation 1:18).

THE NATURE OF THE RESURRECTION

We have already insisted (letter 3) how real it was. It was a bodily resurrection, for when He rose the body was no longer in the tomb. The body was a tangible one, for the women could come and hold Him by the feet (Matthew 28:9).

Jesus persuaded His disciples of its reality by eating and drinking in their presence (Luke 24:41; Acts 10:41); and expressly dealt with their suspicion that He was a ‘spirit’ (Luke 24:37-39). He established the continuity of the new-risen body with the old by showing them the marks in His hands and feet, and inviting them to touch them (Luke 24:40; John 20:20). It will be by those marks again that He will be known (Zechariah 12:10; Revelation 1:7).

These facts are important. It was a man of flesh whom God created at first in His own image, and that fact should in itself be sufficient to rebuke the silly superiority which sees something unworthy in eternal life being enjoyed in a body. True, the first man did not attain that life, through his iniquity, but it is altogether fitting that the last Adam should be given the glorified body to which Adam might have attained. Our modern world has been so besotted by the unchristian doctrine of ethereal souls that, even now, the fact is hard of acceptance, but the unchallengeable evidence for the state of the risen Christ must overcome our reluctance. The Resurrection of Jesus is (as we shall see) the ground of all Christian hope, and to understand it rightly is essential if we would understand what that hope is.

THE EVIDENCE FOR THE RESURRECTION

A letter (No. 3) has already been devoted to this, and might well be re-read at this stage, but what we have since learned about the Bible and the work of Jesus now qualifies us to take a little further the evidence of the Scriptures. There is no doubt that, at the time when Jesus came, the Jews were expecting their Christ, and the early pages of the Gospels vibrate to their expectations (Matthew 2:2-6 Luke 2:25-32; 3:15; John 1:19; 10:24). There are plenty of passages in the Scriptures which gave them ample ground for expecting their Deliverer—sometime—as we have already seen, but we need now, as they must have had, evidence which pointed to Him then.

There is one such passage pre-eminently, in Daniel 9:24-27. Here the prophet, looking for the deliverance of his people from captivity as the prophet had foretold (verse 2, compare Jeremiah 25:12-29; 10; Ezra 1:1), is referred to a much longer period than Jeremiah’s 70 years for the real deliverance, and is told of “seventy sevens” which are determined (verse 24) for the accomplishment of great ends. The period is divided up into seven sevens (49 years), sixty-two sevens (434 years) and a final seven, and the prophet is told that Messiah shall come after the

first two periods (483 years, verse 25). The period is to begin “from the going forth of the commandment to restore and to build Jerusalem”, and we have a narrow interval between two possible dates. The first (Ezra 7:1-10) is 457 B.C., while the second (Nehemiah 2) is 444 B.C. We will not try to decide between them, nor to judge what precisely is the length of year to be used in determining the exact application of the prophecy. Suffice it that 483 years from these dates take us to about 26 A.D., which is very close to the time when Jesus began His preaching.

Jesus came, then, just when the Jews were expecting their Messiah, their Christ. But He did not do the things they wanted Him to do, and we know that they rejected Him and crucified their King. In their judgment, then, He proved that He was not the Christ after all. But Paul puts his finger on their error when he says, “They that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew Him not, nor yet the voices of the prophets which are read every Sabbath day, they have filled them by condemning Him”. (Acts 13:27). This was the one on which they based their hopes! For, speaking of the last seven in his prophecy, he writes “After the threescore and two weeks shall Messiah be cut off, but not for Himself”, and “in the midst of the week He shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease” (verse 26-27). And we know now, first that Jesus was crucified after 3½ years of preaching, and, second, that His death was a sacrifice for sins which made all other sacrifices and oblations null and void from that point.

If the Jews had rightly read their prophecy they could not have done as they did to Him, as Paul rightly says, but, in their ignorance, they had Him “cut off”, which in the Scriptures means executed. And so they put their own unwilling seal upon His work, “to finish transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness” (verse 24), which we have shown Him to do. By this amazing fulfilment of prophecy, Jesus and Daniel are vindicated together.

But Jesus is “Messiah the Prince”, and such a One, though cut off, must rise again, or He could be no Messiah. The Crucified must take again His life to play the part of Prince, and since the fulfilment of Daniel shows Him to have been Messiah, the Resurrection could not fail to follow. The sacrifice prophecy of Isaiah 53 gives the same sequence: “When thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied” (verses 10-11).

THE PREACHING OF THE RESURRECTION

The Apostles put this truth in the van of their message. This was the driving force of what they had to say. See Acts 1:21-22; 2:22-24, 32; 3:13-15; 4:2; 10:6; 10:30-31 and 10:40; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Peter 1:3. This was the fact which brought them together again in hope, where before they had scattered in despair. It was this which turned the sadness of a death which looked like defeat, into the rejoicing of victory, “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25) seemed an empty mockery when He lay in the grave, but the evidence that it was true lay deep within them now. And to the world, the truth of the Resurrection of Jesus was the prime reason for believing in the truth of the gospel as a whole. A

consciousness of sin might make them (if they had this consciousness) look for a Saviour, but only the supreme demonstration that the Saviour really could save would lead them to accept Him. And therefore, “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved”, (Romans 10:9). “God hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3).

THE HOPE OF THE RESURRECTION

In all that we have had to say about Jesus, up to and including His death, we have had to recognise that His work was unfinished. If we thought of Him as a sacrifice for sin, we could see no reason for believing on Him unless the Resurrection were to show His power. If we thought of Him as the promised Seed of Abraham, we could see no hope of the real fulfilment of the promises of God if He remained in the grave. We know that Abraham died in faith, not having received the promises (Hebrews 11:13), and we know also that Jesus said he would be raised from the dead (Mark 12:26-27) and inherit the Kingdom of God (Luke 13, 28), but what guarantee have we that this can happen if the one who promised it remains in the grave? If we thought of Him as the Seed of David who would restore again the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), we could have no hope that He would do so if He were dead.

But now that the Resurrection has been preached, we can have hope of all these things. We see that His conquest of sin led to His conquest of death also, so much so that Paul can speak of Him as having “abolished death” (2 Timothy 1:10). We know that He can fulfil His task as the Seed and establish the Kingdom of God, with the fulness of power which has been given to Him. We are certain that the gentle preacher who permitted Himself to be slain by His enemies, has now the authority to overcome them and “possess their gate” (Genesis 22:17).

So the New Testament writers speak of the fact. If Christ were dead forever, “Your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (1 Corinthians 15:17-19). But since Christ really did rise, there is hope for all those who are in Him: “Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept”, (verse 20). His claim to be the Resurrection and the Life is established. The Resurrection at the last day (John 11:24 and 5:29) is an assured thing. “If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

The Resurrection is an event of world significance. For “God hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom He hath ordained whereof He hath given assurance unto all men in that He hath raised Him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

THE ASCENSION OF JESUS

But these things have not happened yet. In spite of the earnest entreaties of His disciples—“Wilt thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6)—Jesus did not do

so, but, left them for heaven (Acts 1:9). In spite of His victory over death, His disciples die still, like all men, and there has been no resurrection. In spite of His conquest of sin, sin ranges the world still, and there is no sign that its power has weakened. His bodily resurrection, which led us to hope for so much has not yet borne its fruits. This cannot be the end.

If it is true that the gospel of Jesus has been kept alive, in His absence, by the preaching of the Apostles, and the word which has come to us in the Bible, the fact of the Resurrection has given this preaching an authority which we must not ignore. It is the power of the Resurrection which gives point to God's command to "all men, everywhere, to repent". It is true, as the last letter showed at its close, that Jesus' departure to the right hand of God in heaven (Acts 5:31; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), has established a close relationship between His disciples upon earth, and God in heaven, wherefore He is spoken of as the "Mediator" between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5), whereby those who have believed and obeyed Him can approach closely to the throne of God, and obtain help and forgiveness in acceptable prayer (Hebrews 4:16; Ephes. 3:12).

Both these are true and glorious, but they need something else for their completion. Jesus at the right hand of God is "expecting" (Hebrews 10:13) till His enemies be made His footstool. And expecting means waiting: the time of waiting must draw to a close, and then another and the culminating aspect of the work of Jesus will be revealed.

READING

1. The narratives of the Resurrection (as in Letter 3).
2. Acts 17 and 26.
3. 1 Corinthians 15.
4. Philippians 2 (again).
5. 1 Thessalonians 4.
6. John 11.
7. Hebrews 10, 11 and 12.

LETTER 11: The Return of Jesus

11. THE RETURN OF JESUS

This is a much disbelieved doctrine. It is disbelieved first of all, perhaps, because the prevailing error (among religious people) that our souls go to their reward at death seems to make it unnecessary. What would be the purpose of Jesus' return to a world which is a mere kindergarten of immortal souls? It is disbelieved, second, because of the common religious notion that "The Church" (some particular church, or the churches all together) is the means whereby the Kingdom of God will be spread abroad upon the earth. Why should Jesus come to do what the Church can do itself?—of which, indeed, there is little sign. It is disbelieved, third,

because even religious people seem to prefer their miracles to be in the past: there is a great number of people who will assent to a Virgin Birth and a Resurrection two thousand years ago, who seem to think it incredible that such a thing as the Second Advent of Jesus upon the earth should occur. And all this is apart from the general disbelief of those who have forsaken the foundation of the Christian religion.

We must begin, then, by going over the overwhelming Bible evidence that Jesus is to return. Already we have given good reasons why He must, if His work is to be completed, but now is the time to be systematic about it.

THE TEACHING OF JESUS

1. —“The Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then He shall reward every man according to his works” (Matthew 16:27, Mark 8:38, Luke 9:26).
2. —“In the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit on the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matthew 19:28).
3. —“Ye shall not see me henceforth till ye shall say. Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matthew 23:39).
4. —“They shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory, and he shall send his angels . . . and they shall gather together his elect” (Matthew 24:30, 31; Mark 13:26, 27; Luke 21:27).
5. —“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit on the throne of his glory”. (Matthew 25:31).
6. —“The parable of the man going into the far country (Luke 19:11-27).
7. —“Behold, he cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced Him”. (Revelation 1:7).
8. —“Behold, I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give to every man according as his work shall be”. (Revelation 22:12).

THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

9. —“This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into Heaven”. (1:11: spoken by angels).
10. —“Repent... that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord, and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached

unto you: whom the heaven must receive until the times of the restitution of all things”. (3:19-21: spoken by Peter).

11. —“God hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained”. (17:31: spoken by Paul).
12. —“Judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come”. (1 Corinthians 4:5).
13. —“In Christ shall all be made alive, but every man in his own order: Christ the first fruits; afterward, they that are Christ’s at His coming”. (1 Corinthians 15:22-23).
14. —“Our conversation is in heaven, from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ”. (Philippians 3:20).
15. —“The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God”. (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
16. —“The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ”. (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).
17. —“I charge thee, therefore, before God and our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his Kingdom”. (2 Timothy 4:1).
18. —“As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment, so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many: and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time, without sin, unto salvation”. (Hebrews 9:27-28).
19. —“We have not followed cunningly devised fables when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ”. (2 Peter 1:16).
20. —“Abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming ... We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him”. (1 John 2:28-3:2).

This number could without difficulty be doubled, and it takes no account of a large range of passages where the Second Coming of Jesus is taken for granted without being actually stated. It is an excellent exercise to look for these in the course of our reading, and note them as they occur. Examples of what is meant may be found in Matthew 5:5 and 13:39; Luke 22:18; John 6:39-44. It will be seen that the return of Jesus is established beyond all possible doubt by His own words and those of His apostles. There remain the questions, Why and When He will return.

THE PURPOSE OF JESUS' RETURN

From what has previously been promised and unfulfilled, we can see what this must be, but we are not left to conjecture. As the Seed, He must fulfil the promises made to Abraham, and the faithful children of that patriarch must receive their reward with him; as the King, He must restore the fallen throne of David, and re-establish upon the earth the rule of the Kingdom of God; as the Saviour, He must complete the work He began before and give to them the fruits of His work and their service.

RESURRECTION AND JUDGMENT

Passages in the above list have already shown this, such as (1), (5), (12), (17) and (20). To these we can add from the Old Testament Daniel 12:2, and we have then this general picture: when Jesus returns bodily to the earth ("In like manner as ye have seen Him go. Acts 1:11), He will cause to be raised from the dead those who have understood the responsibilities of his gospel, and died while He has been away. To them will be united people in a similar position who are still alive, and the group will be judged before Him on the basis of their response to His teaching and example. The faithful among them will receive the blessing: "Come, ye blessed of my Father; inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, and the unfaithful the curse: "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels". (Matthew 25:31-46).

"Everlasting fire, in the Bible, is not "the hell" of a now unpopular orthodoxy. It is the symbol of utter destruction at judgment, of those found displeasing to God. See Matthew 5:22 and 29; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15; 23:33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; where the word (Gehenna) is the name of a refuse-pit outside Jerusalem. It has nothing to do with eternal torture, and the phrase "Where their worm dieth not and their fire is not quenched" is taken from Isaiah 66:24, where the destruction of BODIES of rebels is considered' I no doubt in the same place...'

KINGDOM OF GOD

Repeatedly we are told that it will be as a King that Jesus will come, as in examples (2), (5), (6), (11), (13) and (17). It will be then that the promises of His kingship which were outlined in Letter 7 will receive their fulfilment. In the words of Daniel: "In the days of these kings shall the God of Heaven set up a Kingdom which shall never be destroyed: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand for ever". (2:44). The Scriptures contain many pictures of the state of affairs in this kingdom, in which the righteous rule of Jesus and His glorified saints will replace the faulty governments of men, and the evils which flowed from sin be eliminated until the last enemy, which is death, shall be abolished also. Examples will be given in the reading selection at the end of this letter. It appears from one passage (Revelation 20), that the forces of evil will make a last stand after a thousand years of Jesus' government, and will be defeated and finally destroyed, with the ultimate result of which the prophets had spoken, that "the earth shall be

full of the glory of the Lord” and God will, with His Son and His saints, be all in all (Habakkuk 2:14; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; Revelation 21 and 22).

THE JEWISH RACE

We have already seen (Letter 6) that the true heirs of the promises to Abraham are not his fleshly descendants of Israel, who have in the main rejected Christ, but those of all nations who copy his faith, and look to his great Seed, which is Christ. Of Abraham himself, we know that he, together with the other faithful men and women who lived before Christ, will be found established in the glory of the kingdom (Hebrews 11:39-40; Matthew 8:11 and Luke 13:28), but there is a special promise of the natural descendants of this man. True, they are cast off from the promise of life in Christ unless they accept Him (Romans 9,10,11). but there is a firm promise that the nation as a whole will be regathered to its land at the time of the Resurrection of the dead and of the establishment of the Kingdom (Romans 11:15; Ezekiel 36 and 37; Jeremiah 30 and 31). This does not mean that the rejectors of the Lord Jesus will be taken in spite of themselves and glorified as His saints will be glorified. On the contrary, their return is evidently to be a time of great tribulation to themselves (Zechariah 12:6-14). There will come with it a realisation of the wrong done by their forbears to Jesus and, on the part of the penitent, a great sorrow. The people who return will be invited to choose between obedience to God and the retribution which their “abominable things” will bring upon them (Ezekiel 11:14-21), and only those who humble themselves under this reproach will be purified and cleansed, and have their hitherto stony hearts of unbelief changed to an heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:24-34). This is a national restoration to mortal habitation of the land of Palestine, not comparable with the resurrection to immortality which will be the lot of the faithful.

THE TIME OF JESUS’ RETURN

Jesus never gave a specific date for this event. Of the establishment of the Kingdom He said, “It is not for you to know the times and the seasons, which the Father has put in His own power”. (Acts 1:7), and earlier he had said, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36). The time periods given us in the Revelation leaves us in no doubt that Jesus shares that knowledge with the Father now, but it is not the purpose of this letter to enter into such detailed predictions. Rather, it will give certain signs by which the epoch can be identified by those who are alert to the fact that Jesus will come.

1—THE WORLD WILL NOT EXPECT HIM

Peter says “there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, and saying, Where is the promise of His coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation” (2 Peter 3:3-7), and ignoring the lesson of the Flood which came upon an unheeding world, Jesus uses the same parallel when He says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the Ark, and the

Flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot, they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed (Luke 17:26-30).

The world will be in the position of being too busy with its own affairs: its own business, its own natural pursuits, and its own lusts, and it will have lost interest in the solid truths of the gospel of Christ. It will have a form of godliness, but it will have denied the power thereof, and it will love pleasure more than it loves God (2 Timothy 3:4-5; 4:3-4). There will be a disillusionment about it, too, for the persistent prayer for good which animates the faithful will largely have disappeared, and Jesus says, "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Men will have grown weary of crying to a heaven apparently brazen against their supplications.

2—IT WILL BE A TIME OF WAR AND TROUBLE

Jesus says so: "There shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring: men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth: for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud". (Luke 21:25-26). Daniel says so: "There shall be a time of trouble such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time" (Daniel 12:1), of a time just prior to the resurrection of the dead.

Ezekiel says so, and in Chapters 38 and 39 gives a graphic picture of nations gathered together for war just prior to a great intervention by God, and the establishment of the kingdom of Chapter 40 and onwards. Joel says so, in briefer but similar terms (Chapter 3). Just prior to the setting up of the Kingdom of God under Jesus, nations will be engaged in war together, in a time of trouble hitherto unknown, and the turmoil will be resolved by the intervention of God through Him.

3—IT WILL BE A TIME OF JEWISH RETURN

We have already given reason to know that this must occur at some time, and it is most significant that the prophecies already noted in the last paragraph are all dated at the time when Jews will be returning to the land of Palestine. (See Daniel 12:2; Ezekiel 36 and 37; Joel 3:1-2; Luke 21:24).

We may not, perhaps, say that the time is ripe, but the signs of ripening cannot be mistaken. Religion has rarely been as impotent as it is now; belief in the substantial truths of the gospel has never sunk to so low an ebb; preoccupation with the things of this life to the exclusion of true worship was never so rife; with two devastating wars in a generation, disillusionment has seized the whole world. Our recent times of trouble have left everyone with the consciousness that worse may well be to come, and the uneasy feeling that the will to control its possibilities is not there. "Men's hearts failing them for fear" might have been said with fair truth of much

during the period 1939-45, but it looks like being truer still as time goes on. (These words were written very soon after the first two Atom Bombs had been dropped). And since the Balfour Declaration of 1917 Jews have been going back to Palestine in greater numbers than have been there since the second century of our era.

Everything points to our being within measurable distance of the culminating point of God's purpose with the earth. We do not know the day nor the hour. But we do well to heed the warning which Jesus gives in His prophecies: "Watch ye, therefore, and pray always" (Luke 21:36). There are some, even in such a time, who will be able to "Look up, and lift up their heads, for their redemption draweth nigh". It is of this highly important class that the concluding letter will speak.

READING

In addition to the wide range in the notes, the following chapters should be read, some of them not for the first time: Psalm 72; Isaiah 2; 31; 60; 66; Jeremiah 31; Daniel 2; Micah 4; Zechariah 12-14; Matthew 24 and 25; Luke 21, and. both letters to the Thessalonians, where the return of Jesus is mentioned in every chapter.

A.D.N.

LETTER 12: "Understandest thou what thou readest?"

12. "UNDERSTANDEST THOU WHAT THOU READEST?"

Let us go back for a moment to the story from Acts 8 with which this course opened. A man was reading from Isaiah 53 the story of the Suffering Saviour and was anxious to know Who it was. The Christian evangelist, Philip, came up into his chariot and explained that it was Jesus. The upshot was that the enquirer asked the question, "See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized?" and was dipped in water by Philip, and went on his way rejoicing.

What are the ingredients of this story? We can know now (though we could not then, before we began to read our Bibles) that the man in the chariot was a sinner, heading for the death which is the common lot of all sinners, and without hope of staying that end. We know now the pause, for we have traced the development of our sinful race from our first sinful parents, and we know what death means. No doubt this man knew this, too.

But the chapter which he read suggested something better. "He was wounded for our transgressions"—"With His stripes we are healed"—"The Lord hath laid upon Him the iniquity of us all"; these things give us hope of something better, if only we can find to whom the prophet refers. Surely this was behind the reader's question: "Of whom speaketh the

prophet this, of himself or of some other man?" The question was answered by Philip, and we know now what the answer was. Beginning at the same Scripture he preached to him Jesus.

All that we have said about Jesus lies within the scope of that preaching by Philip; the perfection of his life as an example; the giving of His body to death as a pattern of our flesh's deserts; the offering of the Son of God as the assurance of the love of God; the Resurrection as the certainty that salvation can be assured. All this we know. It must have been something like this that Philip preached, and the Ethiopian heard.

The outcome was his baptism. When we first read the story we only knew that some powerful urge had moved him to an act we could not explain. But since that time we have learned that Jesus, also, was baptized, and we have read passages in which He commends that course to His disciples, and they ask it of their converts. Let us consider baptism a little further.

THE NECESSITY OF BAPTISM

Here is the evidence, stated boldly:

- (1) John was baptizing with the "baptism of repentance for remission of sins". (Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:4-8; Luke 3:1-17; John 1:19-28).
- (2) Jesus Himself was baptized at about the age of 30, commending it to others also with the words, "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil righteousness". (Matthew 3:13-17; Luke 3:21-23).
- (3) When Jesus was risen from the dead, He told His apostles to go and preach among all nations, requiring baptism of those who believed their gospel. (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15-16). While the commission of Luke does not mention baptism (Luke 24:47), the mention of "repentance and remission of sins" couples it immediately with the previous examples.
- (4) The Apostles faithfully carried out this commandment. At Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized every one of you for the remission of your sins" was Peter's command, and, "They that gladly received his word were baptized" was their response (Acts 2:37-42). The converted Samaritans were baptized (Acts 8:12-13) by Philip, and so was the Ethiopian of whom we have already spoken (verses 35-40). Baptism was the act of submission of Paul when he was persuaded of the truth of Christianity (Acts 9:1-19 and 22:15-16). It was the introduction granted to the Gentile Cornelius when the faith was first extended to his race (Acts 10:44-48). When Paul's gaoler at Philippi had been taught the gospel, he was baptized (Acts 16:33). The need for a proper baptism is brought out plainly in the cases of Apollos and the Ephesian believers (Acts 18:24; 19:1-7).
- (5) It is taken for granted that baptism is the symbol of admission to the Christian community, whenever the subject is broached in the Epistles. Romans 6 (of which more will be said)

assumes that all Christians are “baptized into Jesus Christ” (verse 3), and Galatians 3:27 specifically says so. 1 Corinthians 1:13-17, so far from being an argument against baptism, is an insistence that baptism must be into the Name of Jesus, and that no question of personal prestige must interfere. The difficult verse in 1 Corinthians 15:29 must surely mean that all believers are baptized, and that their baptism is a mere baptism for the dead unless Christ had been raised. In three passages other than these, baptism appears as the essential instrument whereby salvation becomes possible (Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12; Peter 3:21).

- (6) Other passages clearly speak of baptism, though they do not mention it by name, and we can specially mention John 3:5 and Titus 3:5. The former says that unless a man is born again “of water and spirit” he cannot enter the Kingdom of God, while the latter speaks of believers as being saved, not by works but by the mercy of God, through “washing of water and renewing of Holy Spirit”. When we can see in how many of the examples already given baptism was followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, there can be no doubt that this rebirth, or regeneration, of water is the same as baptism.

THE FORM AND CONDITIONS OF BAPTISM

The case for the necessity of baptism is unimpeachable. It appears as the accepted and necessary accompaniment of conversion. But the ceremony of the “christening” of infants has interfered with our clear understanding of what the rite means and it is therefore necessary to be more specific. Notice, first of all, that in all cases where details are given, instruction goes before baptism. It is “he that believeth and is baptized” who shall be saved, the disciples were to “teach all nations and baptize them”; the Jews at Pentecost, the Samaritans, the Ethiopian, Paul, Cornelius and the gaoler of Philippi were all taught before they received baptism. Then notice the state of mind in which those who had heard were baptized. It is variously called “believing”, being “pricked at heart”, “repenting”, and is accompanied by a keen desire to change from being unsaved to being within hope of salvation. All this presupposes a grown up, understanding mind definitely committing itself to a course of obedience to the will of God. It has nothing to do with an uncomprehending rite performed upon new-born children.

Then notice the conditions in which it was performed. Jesus went down into the water and came up again (Matthew 3:16), and John was baptizing in Aenon “because there was much water there”. The Ethiopian (who would certainly have had water in his chariot) waited until “they came unto a certain water”, and then both the baptizer and the baptized went down into it to perform the baptism (Acts 8:34-40). The word itself fully accords with these examples, for it means “to make fully wet”, and is used in the sense of “to dip”.

We conclude, then, that baptism in the early church required three things: (i) that the gospel should be made known to the candidate; (ii) that he should accept its message and express repentance; (iii) that he should be dipped beneath water.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM

If this were a ceremony we cannot explain, the fact that Jesus Himself underwent it and said “Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness” would be sufficient to commend it to the obedience of all who wished to be accepted by Him. But we can explain it. We have already made plain what repentance is, and what is the need for it: we are sinful men and women who look for salvation from God, and see how Jesus has made it possible. We confess this and: seek to turn again to a new manner of life and a new confidence. Jesus required this of us when He said, “If any man would be my disciple let him deny himself, and take up his Cross, and follow me” (Matthew 16:24), and so drew a picture of a sinful band of men and women crucifying their flesh and accepting a new service.

It is precisely this picture which Paul draws in Romans 6 of baptism. The baptized are baptized into the death of Jesus and in this act “crucify the old man” (6:6) after the fashion of Jesus’s death. They come out of this symbolic burial raised again to a new life, in which they no longer trust in the flesh, to sin and die, but trust in God, seek to follow the righteousness of Christ, and look for the “gift of God” which “is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (6:23).

In other places (as John 3:5, Titus 3:5), baptism is spoken of as rebirth, and the force of this is now easily seen. Our fleshly heritage is no use to us, so far as eternal life is concerned, leading only to death. A new basis is needed for life, and so the disciple undergoes a ceremony of rebirth, in which he confesses himself a new-born child of God, and seeks the nurture and upbringing which such a child should have. Indeed, he is called a “new-born babe” (1 Peter 1:23; 2:2), and given the high dignity of a “son of God”, “begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:13). This change, not of the will of men but of God, is the change which we have shown Jesus to exemplify in His life, and it is the fundamental change.

It is not to be supposed that baptism works any miraculous change in the nature of the one baptized. He is still in his flesh mortal, still capable of sin, still sure to go to the grave unless prevented by the Master’s return. Baptism does not make him secure, as the Apostle Paul himself well knew (1 Corinthians 9:26-27; Hebrews 6:4-6), nor does it make him sinless (1 John 1:6-10). But a right baptism sets him in a new relationship with God. The enemy has become a friend, the alien has become a citizen (Ephesians 2:11-22). The High Priest will act on his behalf (Hebrews 4:14-16) before God. He has entered the fellowship of the sons of God, and become an heir of the promises, an heir on probation.

THE BREAKING OF BREAD

The Christian disciple has been bought with a price, “not with corruptible things, as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19), and he must never forget that he stands by grace. The means has been provided whereby he shall be constantly reminded of it, for the ceremony of the Last Supper, at which Jesus broke bread (“This is my body, which is given for you”) and distributed a cup of wine

("This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for remission of sins") has been ordained as a continual memorial of what has been done for him (Matthew 26:20-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 10:14-21; 11:17-34).

From the earliest days the disciples met together to celebrate this feast, week by week on the first day (which we know now as Sunday), and it became a mark of the disciples of Jesus (Acts 2:42,46; 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:18 and 16:2). No doubt Jesus had set the example for their first-day observance in His encounter with the two disciples recorded in Luke 24:30.

It is impossible to perform this remembrance regularly, and not be constantly reminded of the work which has been done for the redemption of the believer, of the weakness of the flesh which needed it, and of the love of God which prompted it. It is impossible to partake of the cup of blessing, and not be reminded of the supreme blessing. "I will no more partake of the fruit of the vine till I drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom", and so look forward to the time when Jesus will be back in the earth, to be glorified in His saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (2 Thessalonians 1:10). The Service recalls the principal points in the believer's faith: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that Christ is the King of the Kingdom of God, ruling even now over the subjects who have made their submission to Him, and destined to rule in the time to come over the whole world.

THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

So far we have dealt with principles, and there has emerged through our course a system of understanding which is the necessary preliminary to an acceptable life. We have seen our race fall from the pleasure of God, by sin, and seen ourselves share the common condemnation to death, which is the wages of sin. We have learned by a hard road, that the sanctity and holiness of God must be acknowledged, by those who would come before Him, and we have seen in the life of Jesus the supreme and perfect example of such a recognition. We have been taught how we may make that approach ourselves, and put ourselves in the position of new-born children entering upon the course of the godly life, in expectation of Judgment at the Return of Jesus, which may issue for us in the blessedness of immortality. But we have learned also that this birth is only the beginning of the new life, and not the life itself!

There are continual exhortations that a course so begun must be continued in the same spirit. The man who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God (Luke 9:62). The man who said, "I go, Sir", and went not, received no credit for his profession (Matthew 21:30). The one who commenced to build a tower and left off in the middle because he had not counted the cost, was an object of scorn (Luke 14:28). To accept the yoke of Jesus is an act of deliberate, calculated submission to Him with consequence which must be faced throughout life.

The warnings are continual, too, against divided service. Sometimes it is the conflict between God and Mammon (the personification of selfish greed for possession) which is stressed (Matthew 6:24). Sometimes it is the conflict between Flesh and Spirit (Romans 8 throughout;

Galatians 5:16-25) whereby the Christian is reminded that the flesh leads him to death, while only the revelation of God's will through the Spirit, and the working of God's will in his life can lead him to life eternal. Sometimes the disciples and the world are set in opposition (John 17:6-16; 2 Corinthians 6:14; 7:1), and the believer is taught that his is a lonely pilgrimage of grace amidst the multitude who do not heed, or who actively hinder, the message of the gospel of Christ.

ARE THERE FEW THAT BE SAVED?

For we must not delude ourselves into supposing that the way of salvation will be popular, nor must we take the popular voice as to whether the things outlined in this course are to be accepted or not. The signs of Jesus's coming which were given in the last letter should be sufficient warning against that, and it is clear that Jesus Himself had no illusion as to the popularity of His gospel. The multitude assented to His crucifixion then; the time of His coming will be like the time of the Flood, when few were saved; and His exhortation to His hearers was, "Enter ye in at the narrow gate; for wide is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat; because strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it". (Matthew 7:13-14).

The path of submission and humble obedience to God is not popular. We have learned too much of the lessons of Israel and the Old Testament generally to expect that it should be. Those who were acceptable to God before confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims, with no continuing city (Hebrews 11:13; 13:14) and it is not different now, so that Peter refers to Jesus's disciples in similar terms (1 Peter 2:11; compare Hebrews 13:14). It is cause neither for loneliness nor for pride in those who do thus respond to the message, not for loneliness, because they are more that be for us than they that are against us (2 Kings 6:16), and they who cleanse themselves from the defilements of the flesh become the temple of God (2 Corinthians 7:1; 1 Corinthians 3:16; John 14:23); nor for pride, because we have nothing which we did not receive, and we stand by grace, wherefore it becomes us not to be high-minded but fear (Romans 11:20).

The believers are called a people for the Name of God, taken out from the Gentiles (Acts 15:14), and it is this high office which the believer, who hears the word and is baptized, accepts and undertakes to discharge.

"THOU SHALT LOVE THE LORD WITH ALL THY HEART"

We may not enlarge upon the duties of the new Christian. This commandment, with the one which is like unto it, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, repeatedly quoted in the New Testament, in Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30, Luke 10:27, Romans 13:9, Galatians 5:14, James 2:8), form the basis of it. The two cannot be separated. He who loves God must love his brother also (1 John 3 and 4). The commands are comprehensive: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"; "The whole law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself".

Many of the Christian virtues embodied in these commandments, and elaborated in such epitomes as the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5-7), a Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-49) and long sections of the epistles (such as Romans 12-15, 1 Corinthians 13, Ephesians 4-6 and many others), are given general assent, and are indifferently observed in practice. Many of them are applauded as magnificent, but frankly wondered at as impracticable, and there are few who would claim to have reached perfection in them—and none who could claim it truly. There is no limit to what Jesus will accept from His disciples, yet there is no walk of life, respectable or sinful, which has not contributed its quota to those who put themselves under His obedience. The “living sacrifice” to which the Christian is called is a life of constant improvement in God’s service, with God’s help. Falls are frequent, but the opportunity to rise again is provided. The more Christian he becomes, the less he is disposed to pose as an example to his fellows, and the more he becomes aware that his deficiencies can only be filled up by God in Jesus. The more, too, does he know that they are, and that it is God that worketh in you, both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). The less he reckons on the fleeting delights of this life, and the more he turns all his pleasure to the service of God, and is transformed by the renewing of his mind (Romans 12:2), the more, then does he delight in the fellowship of Jesus Christ, and look for the time when He shall appear, and they who have been called His brethren now, as sons of God, will receive in His presence their final joy, and “Be like him, for we shall see him as he is”. (1 John 3:1-3).

READING

A long list of reading can be gathered from the note. No more will be added here.

CONCLUSION

It has already been said that we have only reached the beginning. A course of action has been commenced, which we believe to be the whole duty of man. Those who have thus far understood the Bible will want to continue, diligently, their reading of it, so that the whole book, which we have been obliged to treat summarily, may become their treasured storehouse of divine knowledge. The address from which the letters have been obtained, can be used for requests for all further help to this end. The outworking of this message we place, humbly but confidently into the hands of the God to whose glory it is offered.

A.D.N.