

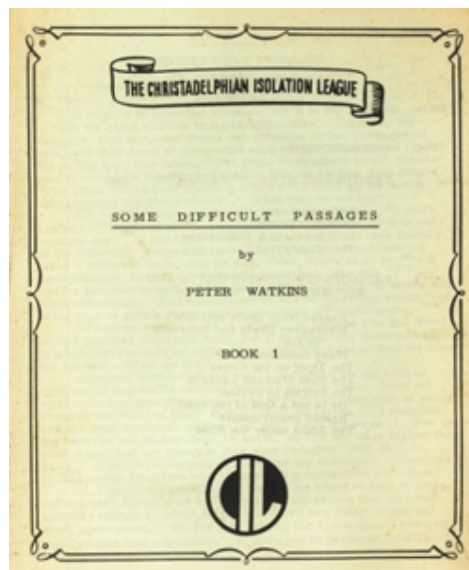
THE CHRISTADELPHIAN ISOLATION LEAGUE

SOME DIFFICULT PASSAGES

by

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BOOK 1



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BOOK 1.

SOME DIFFICULT PASSAGES.

(1) INTRODUCTION.

Attitude

It is good to know the answers; but it is far more important to have the right attitude to Bible difficulties. Suppose, for example, that someone draws our attention to two passages of Scripture that seem to contradict each other. How do we react? We do **not** say, like some, “The Bible contradicts itself; therefore it cannot be the Word of God”. Nor do we say, like others, “The Bible contradicts itself: therefore it cannot **all** be divine. It only **contains** the Word of God”. What then do we say?

Some of us have occasionally been known to say, “I can’t see any difficulty at all” - a remark that happens to be true only because our eyes are tight closed, and we refuse to look frankly at the difficult passages in question. Sometimes our defence takes a different form, and we say, “Yes, there is an apparent contradiction, but it is very easily explained, like this... “and we proceed to becloud the issue with a multitude of words and little knowledge. And sometimes we are in the happy position of being able to give a reasonable explanation of the difficulty.

Of course we are right in refusing to believe that the Word of God contains contradictions; but it is obviously dishonest to pretend that there is no difficulty — when there is; or that we know the answer - when we don’t.

Apparent contradictions are by no means the only Bible difficulties that baffle us, and reveal our ignorance. Need we stress the fact that there are bound to be many problems of many kinds in the Word of God? God Himself declares, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55: 8, 9). Indeed, it would be surprising if we did not encounter difficulties in a message from One who is so much greater than ourselves.

The pertinent question is: How do we react in face of these difficulties? Already we have reminded ourselves that we need humility enough to admit freely that there are many things we don’t understand. We are not “letting the Truth down” when we openly make this admission. A pretence to personal infallibility

is far more likely to create an unfavourable impression. Which of us could claim to know all the answers to all the problems concerning sacrifices under the Mosaic law? Or who could explain coherently and exhaustively that great concentration of Scripture symbology found in the Revelation? Or, for that matter, who could claim a complete understanding of the “simplest” Bible subject? We have much to learn. “if any man thinketh he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know”.

Only those deeply conscious of their limited understanding are likely to develop an intense desire to understand more. The Scriptures make it clear that the Almighty appreciates this desire for understanding in His servants, “it is the glory of God to conceal a thing: but the honour of kings is to search out a matter”. The prophet Daniel is an outstanding example of one who sought for understanding; and it was when he was thus engaged that he was addressed as “a man greatly beloved”, and was given a deeper knowledge of the things of God.

“Seek, and ye shall find”, was the Lord’s counsel. We can do this in two ways: by asking God to enlighten us; and by searching the Scriptures for knowledge. Indeed, our prayers to God will be that He will guide us in our Bible explorations. Thus the Psalmist prayed, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (119: 18)

All the answers

It cannot be emphasized too much that the Bible contains all the answers to all Bible difficulties. The Scriptures explain the Scriptures. Here is a typical example to illustrate how the Bible provides the answers to its own difficulties. The “answer” may be familiar to many already. In Matt. 16: 28 we read that the Lord Jesus says to his disciples, “Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom”. What do these words mean? They cannot mean that these men were immortal; nor can they be taken to imply that the kingdom “should immediately appear”.

The words that follow in Matthew 17 provide the answer. Six days later, and therefore long before death overtook them, three disciples witnessed the Lord’s transfiguration on a high mountain. That this was some kind of a preview of “the Son of man coming in his kingdom” is explained by one of these disciples, Peter: “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when

we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (note the theme!), but were eye-witnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount” (2 Peter 1: 16-18).

Let us now draw a little closer to our subject, and glance at the types of difficult passages that we hope to consider in this booklet. There are a number of passages concerning the Lord Jesus Christ that seem to teach his personal pre-existence; there are other Scriptures that appear to contradict general Bible teaching concerning death and resurrection; others again concerning the devil and demons present their difficulties; and the numerous remaining problems can, for **our** purposes, be called “miscellaneous”.

(2) THE “PRE-EXISTENCE” PASSAGES

General.

We shall try to deal with these difficulties according to their groups. First we shall look at some of the passages that seem to teach that the Lord Jesus Christ pre-existed. A few general remarks on the subject will serve as an introduction to all “Pre-existence” passages.

Matthew and Luke give us more simple, straightforward biographies of the Lord Jesus than John, where so many of the “pre-existence” passages occur. And Matthew and Luke both tell us about the **birth** of Jesus Christ. If Jesus was born in a certain place at a certain time (as these gospel writers tell us), and if this birth was a real birth, he could not have pre-existed. Or, to approach it from the other point of view, if Jesus really did preexist, the birth would not have been a true birth, but a change of phase. The language of Matthew and Luke makes it clear that the birth (though different in important detail from every other) was really a beginning.

Luke 1: 35 reads as follows; “And the angel answered and said unto her, the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God”. If Jesus had pre-existed, then these words would have to be regarded as an account of a change — a change whereby the pre-existent Jesus became a human babe. All who believe in the pre-existence of Christ are committed to this view. It would be fair to ask such people questions like: Why is the pre-existent Jesus not so much as mentioned in a passage which is supposed to describe how he became a human child? Why is the Scripture only concerned with the Holy Spirit and Mary? Where was the already-existing Jesus when conception took place? — and birth followed? Why does Luke say, “**Therefore** also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God”, if the Son of God had existed from the beginning? Such questions as these reveal the weakness of the pre-existence theory.

We can arrive at this same conclusion by another line of reasoning. If the Lord Jesus had pre-existed, he would have been alive in Old Testament times. If that were so, it would be reasonable to expect the Old Testament to contain references to this already-existing Son of God. There is indeed an abundance of reference to the Lord Jesus in the Old Testament; but these references are predictions. They do not speak of Jesus

as a contemporary; they look forward to One who was yet to come. It may be contended that these passages are simply looking forward to the time of our Lord's earthly ministry. Certainly they are doing this; but some of them are worded in such a way as to show that he had no existence at all when the predictions were made. For example: "I (God) will be his father, and he shall be my son" (1 Chron. 17: 13); "Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth" (Psa. 89: 27). These promises would not have made sense if the Son of God was alive when they were uttered.

In John's Gospel - "In the beginning was the Word"

Now we turn to John 1. The argument is usually presented to us like this: John 1: 14 ("And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...") clearly refers to Jesus. Jesus then was the Word; and because the Word was "in the beginning" (v. 1), and "all things were made by him" (v. 3), we must conclude that Jesus was in the beginning and that all things were made by Jesus.

It may be helpful to tabulate our answer thus:

1. Any interpretation of John 1 that conflicts with the plain teaching of Matthew and Luke about the birth of Jesus Christ is bound to be wrong.
2. Any interpretation of John 1 that conflicts with Bible teaching that the Father is the Creator is bound to be wrong. Isa. 42: 5-7 is helpful here: "Thus saith God the Lord, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein; I the Lord have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; to open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison". We recognise the Lord Jesus here as the Light of the Gentiles, and the one who opens the blind eyes. But the passage speaks of a greater than he, who calls him, holds his hand, and helps him to fulfil these great purposes. The greater one is described in v. 5 as "God the Lord", and He it is who "created the heavens, and stretched them out." The Father is the Creator.
3. It is rather naive to say that Jesus and the Word are synonymous throughout the prologue of John's gospel, just because Jesus is the "Word... made flesh" of v. 14. If the Logos simply

means Jesus, why use the word Logos anyway? We suggest instead that the content of John 1: 1-14 could be summarized thus: From the very beginning, and invariably, God acts according to a principle, comprehended by the word "Word". The supreme manifestation of this principle is Jesus - the Word made flesh. Hebrews 1 is a parallel: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners **spake** in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days **spoken** unto us by his Son".

4. What then is the principle comprehended by the "Word"? Psalm 33 provides the explanation. V. 6 reminds us of John's statement that all things were made by the Word: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth"; and v. 9 explains further: "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast". God **always** expresses His will before acting. Thus it was in creation ("God said, Let there be..."), and thus it has been ever since. And the supreme expression of the will of God - the embodiment of God's will - is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let us move on. Certain passages are frequently quoted as proofs that Jesus pre-existed. We have already come to the conclusion that Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Lord's birth make pre-existence impossible; and we have found confirmation of this conclusion in Old Testament, Messianic prophecies. Obviously, therefore, the passages quoted in support of pre-existence are being misunderstood. Even if we cannot explain them, we have at least to be clear on the point that they cannot teach pre-existence, because this would make them contradict other plain scriptures.

Let us then look at some of these 'pre-existence' passages from John's gospel, and see whether an acceptable alternative explanation can be found. We have already examined the opening verses of John 1. Other passages from the same gospel that are quoted for the same purpose are: -

"No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven" (3: 13).

"What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" (6: 62).

"Before Abraham was, I am" (8: 58).

"And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (17: 5).

".. thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world"(17: 24).

A Key.

It is always helpful to take the context into account. Here we shall think, not merely of the immediate contexts of the passages listed, but of the gospel itself which contains this series. It has certain distinctive features.

In the first place we observe that in the discourses recorded in John's gospel, the Lord Jesus repeatedly speaks of the spiritual counterparts of those things that pertain to natural, human life. Thus he spoke to Nicodemus about spiritual birth; to the woman at the well about spiritual water; to the disciples about spiritual meat; to the Jews about the necessity of eating and drinking, spiritually, of his flesh and blood; to the Jews again about spiritual blindness and spiritual death.

We can set alongside this feature of John's gospel another related feature. When the Lord Jesus uses this natural language to speak of these spiritual things, his listeners repeatedly make the same mistake; they take him literally. When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about spiritual birth, he said, "How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (3: 4). When he spoke about "living water" to the woman at the well, she requested: "Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw" (4: 15). When the disciples were told, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of", they said one to another, "Hath any man brought him ought to eat?" (4: 33). When Jesus insisted upon the necessity of eating his flesh and drinking his blood, the Jews protested: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (6: 52). Perhaps we could add to this list the question of the Pharisees: "Are we blind also?" (9: 40); and the remark of the disciples concerning the Lord's intention to "wake" Lazarus: "if he sleep, he shall do well" (11: 12).

Here then we have a key to the understanding of John's gospel. We have observed that Jesus frequently uses this kind of figurative language wherein he described things pertaining to spiritual life in terms drawn from natural life; and we have seen, too, that the error that characterized his hearers was that of applying his words literally.

The passage concerning the Lord's coming down from heaven (3: 13) is in that part of John 3 that tells us about Nicodemus — who reasoned too literally. Obviously Jesus came down from heaven in the sense that he brought a message from God. The same gospel says, "There was a man sent from God whose

name was John”. No one would seriously suppose that John had been in heaven with God, because it is stated that God sent him, And yet it is insisted that comparable words concerning Jesus are to be understood in this way.

Similarly, the words concerning the Son of man ascending up where he was before (6: 62), are spoken on that occasion when the Jews were protesting about the literal eating of his flesh. Jesus was here representing himself as the antitypical manna -the spiritual bread from heaven. It was the spiritual part of him that could provide them with sustenance: and that had come from God — from heaven. Jesus rebuked their obsession with things literal by saying, “It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (v. 63)

“Before Abraham was, I am” (8: 58), These words are difficult to understand, and we can only make suggestions. It is worth noting that the Jews misunderstood Jesus in this discourse too. Jesus had said that Abraham had seen his day; “Your father Abraham, rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad” (v. 56). With the eye of faith Abraham had looked into the future - not just to the Lord’s first coming, but to the “day of the Lord” — the day of his glorious re-appearing. Though Jesus had said distinctly that Abraham had seen his day, the Jews inverted this and accused him of claiming to have seen Abraham: “Thou art not yet fifty years old and hast thou seen Abraham?” (v. 57). Jesus did not trouble to correct their perverse misrepresentation of his words. Instead (it is suggested) he propounded another great principle that also makes time almost an irrelevancy: “Before Abraham was, I am”, he said. In the mind of God, Jesus occupied a central position even before Abraham was born.

And now to the words of John 17. In v. 5 Jesus claims to have had glory with God “before the world was”; and in v. 24 he claims that God loved him “before the foundation of the world”. To have had glory with God, and to have been loved by God, before the foundation of the world, is regarded as proof that he must have existed before the foundation of the world.

Ephesians 1: 3, 4 helps us to understand the words of John 17: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; according as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be

holy and without blame before him in love”. Paid here says that the believers were chosen before the foundation of the world. Is this to be taken as proving that they must therefore have existed before the foundation of the world? Only in the mind of God, surely. Consistency requires then that the same words be understood in the same way when they apply to the Lord Jesus Christ. In the mind of God, he received glory, and was loved, before the foundation of the world. It is written that God’s purpose is so sure that He “quickeneth the dead and calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Rom. 4: 17) The words from John 17 and Ephesians 1 are examples of this great principle.

Colossians and Philippians.

The words of Col. 1: 15, 16 are frequently quoted by those who believe in the pre-existence of Christ. The apostle speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ thus: “Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth...” It is assumed that the reference is to the physical creation; and it is argued that since the Lord Jesus created all things, he must be older than the creation described in Genesis.

Firstly, we remind ourselves again of the fact that one Scripture does not contradict another. Paul would not contradict Isa. 42: 5-7, where it is stated that the Father, and not the Son, is the Creator.

Next, we take note of the description of the Lord Jesus as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (R. V). These words are an echo of Gen. 1: 26: “And, God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”. Although the Lord Jesus was doubtless in the mind of God when this intention was expressed, there was obviously an immediate application to Adam. In a limited sense, he was created in God’s image, as Gen. 1: 27 states; and he was the firstborn of the human creation - all others descending from him. Adam failed, and the image was shattered. The natural descendents of Adam were doomed to failure. A new creation was necessary. Accordingly the Lord Jesus was created in the image of God, and it was God’s intention that he should be the beginning — the firstborn — of the new creation.

Col. 1: 18 makes it clear that the apostle is thinking of a **new** creation when he described Jesus as “the firstborn of all

creation:” “He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn **from the dead**; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence”. The thought is carried on to Col. 3: 9, 10: “Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; and have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him”.

Since the creation in question is the new creation, the fact that Jesus is the firstborn of this creation does not imply that he is before Adam. The passage does not teach Pre-existence at all. There is however another interesting question. Is the new creation to be regarded as a work effected **by** Christ, as the A. V. of Col. 1: 16 renders it (“For by him were all things created”); or **in** Christ, as the R. V. has it (“For in him were all things created”). How should this Greek preposition “en” be translated here? Prepositions are notoriously elastic things, and grammatically either rendering is permissible. The question we must therefore ask is: What does the sense require? We have seen that what Adam is to the old creation, the Lord Jesus Christ is to the new. The old creation was created **in** Adam — not by him; and similarly the new creation is created **in** Christ — not by him. The whole epistle is consistent with this idea. “In Christ” is the great theme of Colossians. The church is exhorted to be only and altogether in Christ. “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him” (2: 9, 10).

Another scripture that is sometimes quoted to support Pre-existence is Phil. 2: 5-8: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was 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”.

The R. V. helps us to see that, here again, there is an implied contrast with Adam. Instead of “thought it not robbery” (v. 6), the R. V. reads, “counted it not a prize”, and also supplies the marginal note: “Gr. a thing to be grasped at”. We are to think of Adam’s grasping the fruit of the forbidden tree - a tree which, it was claimed, could make men become as gods. Not so the Lord Jesus! Although he began as the

Son of God, he did not take advantage of his birthright and grasp at the prizes that his elevated status seemed to offer. Remember how he resisted the temptations that were introduced by the words, “If thou be the Son of God...” “ He became a bondservant; and then he humbled himself still further in becoming “obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”. **“The Mighty God”**

It might be opportune to look now at a passage which, though not directly concerned with pre-existence, appears to lend support to the doctrine of the trinity. The words of Isa. 9: 6 are well known to us: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace”. How can some of these titles be applied to one who was dependent upon, and subject to his Father? There are two points here: -

- 1) The Lord Jesus represents his Father, The names that he bears are not his own names, in the original sense: they are the names of his Father, whom he manifests. The same principle is expressed in Exo, 23: 20, 21, An angel is described as bearing the name of God: “Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not: for he will not pardon your transgressions; for my name is in him”.
- 2) The coming of the holy child Is also predicted in Isa. 7: 14. Here the child is called Immanuel — God with us. Observe how the names of Isa. 9: 6 are an expansion of the one name, God with us, God’s attributes and purposes are stated in Isa. 9: 6. Or, to express it in another way, see how Immanuel is a summary of the names of Isa. 9: 6.

(3) Difficult Passages Concerning Death and Resurrection.

We turn our attention now to difficult passages of another kind. We know that the general teaching of Scripture is that death is the opposite of life, that it overtakes all men, and that the only escape from death is by resurrection, when the Lord Jesus returns to the earth. There are a few passages that, at first sight, appear to conflict with this general Bible teaching. **“Passed from death unto life”**

John 5: 24, 25 reads like this: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live”. How are these words to be understood?

It seems clear when we compare v. 25 with vv. 28, 29 that the Lord is speaking of spiritual death and resurrection in v. 25 and physical death and resurrection in vv. 28, 29. The relevant words are set side by side for comparison: -

verse 25

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live.”

verses 28, 29

“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation”.

Note the following points, which make it obvious that v. 25 (and v. 24, which deals with the same subject) is concerned with spiritual death and resurrection, whereas vv. 28, 29 are concerned with physical death and resurrection:

- 1) The words, “Marvel not at this: for...” are clearly designed to introduce something different. There is a contrast between the two kinds of resurrection therefore.
- 2) V. 25 includes “and now is” - showing that it is concerned with the present; whereas v. 28, omitting this, has to do with the future.
- 3) “in the graves” and “shall come forth” are additions in vv. 28, 29, which show that they are concerned with literal

death and resurrection.

- 4) Judgment is linked with the physical resurrection of the “last day”.

Verse 2 5 has therefore to do with spiritual death and resurrection. The connection with v. 24 is obvious, and we must also conclude that the passing from death unto life, referred to here, is, in fact, a passing from death “in trespasses and sins” into newness of life in Christ Jesus. **“Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die”** (Jn. 11: 26)

It has been suggested that these words refer to those still alive when the Lord Jesus returns, as distinct from those who have died and will be resurrected. Those who will be resurrected, it is claimed, are accounted for in the earlier statement: “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live”.

An alternative suggestion is submitted here. Let us first look at Rev. 1: 18 however. It may help us to understand John 11: 26. “I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen: and have the keys of hell and of death”. The Lord makes two claims concerning himself: (1) that he has been raised from the dead; and (2) that he is immortal. He also claims to have two keys whereby he can save others by the same two processes that God employed to save him. The key of hell (the grave) unlocks the grave and brings the dead forth: the key of death opens a way through the barrier of mortality, and thus enables those who have been resurrected to live for ever. Observe that the two claims that the Lord makes concerning himself are to be taken consecutively: resurrection first; then immortality. In the same way, the two keys are to be used consecutively: resurrection first; then immortality.

Now let us look at the full statement in John 11, to see whether these words can be understood in the same way. “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die”. The Lord Jesus makes two claims: (1) “I am the resurrection”; and (2) “I am the life”. Then he proceeds to amplify these claims in turn: (1) I am the resurrection — I can call the dead to life (“He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live”); and (2) I am the life — I can give eternal life to those whom I have called forth (“whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die”). The two claims are to be taken consecutively, as in Revelation 1.

“Many mansions” (John 14)

This passage has been quoted at funeral services for generations. There are many mansions in heaven, we are told, and Christ has gone there to prepare a place for his disciples. When they die, they will follow him to heaven. The words quoted in support of this read thus: “Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (vv. 1, 2).

Usually we answer by inviting our “opponent” to read the next verse: “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye maybe also”. Christ is coming to the earth again,, we say, and then the union with his disciples will take place. So the disciples do not go to heaven at death. And there the argument usually ends. An effective answer, certainly: but is it the right one? Do the words, “I will come again” really refer here to the second coming? Let us examine the context.

By taking chapter 13 into account, we see that the Lord Jesus is not here comforting those who are bereaved, as Paul does in 1 Thessalonians 4. The hearts of the disciples are not troubled by the departure of their deceased brethren, but by the prospect of the Lord’s departure (cf. 13: 33 etc.). How then does Jesus console his troubled disciples? By assuring them that the separation will not last long. He is going to the Father: they may follow him to the Father, He has already said, “Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow me afterwards” (13: 36), It is this thought that he is now developing in chapter 14.

The expression “going to the Father” is one that can be understood in a physical (if that is the right word) and a spiritual sense. In John’s gospel the emphasis is usually on spiritual truths; though, as we noted earlier, the oft-repeated error is to take the discourses too literally. The Lord Jesus went to the Father literally and in a spiritual sense; but it would seem that the access to the Father promised to the believers in John 13, 14 is a spiritual one effected by the mediation of Jesus. It is an important scriptural principle that the saints enact spiritually what the Lord Jesus enacted literally. Birth of the spirit, circumcision, resurrection, ascension, all these things happened literally to the Lord Jesus, and they all have spiritual counterparts in the lives of believers (see Col. 2 & 3 for

example.) There are many parallels between John's gospel and Hebrews; and one of the themes of Hebrews concerns the literal approach of the Lord Jesus to the Father, and the spiritual "drawing nigh" of the believers, thus made possible.

Reverting then to John 14: the Father's house is the temple -the spiritual temple of which we read in 1 Peter 2: 5: "Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house". Christ, by his access to the Father, made it possible for the disciples to enter -or to become components of — this house. Then, as a true manifestation of the Father ("He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" John 14: 9), he would "come again" and dwell in his disciples' hearts. The comforting promise is therefore of a mutual indwelling — they in the Father's spiritual house, the Lord Jesus in their hearts — made possible by the sacrifice and mediating work of Jesus. V. 23 clinches this: "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him".

It is significant that the Greek word translated "abode" in v. 23 is "mone" - the same word as is translated "mansions" in v. 2. These are the only two occurrences of this word in Scripture. The sense in which the word is used in v. 23 (i.e. dwelling in the heart) is a guide to the intended sense of the word in the controversial passage - v. 2. Lest it be protested that we are interpreting this scripture too "spiritually", we observe that Philip in this very discourse (v. 9) is rebuked for being too literal. It would seem; that Thomas, too, is making the same mistake (v. 5)

The Thief on the Cross.

"And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23: 42, 43).

We know the problem. It sounds as if the Lord Jesus was promising the thief a place in paradise on that very day. Although our purpose is to discuss possible ways of dealing with this problem, we ought not to forget that the great purpose of this wonderful story is to teach us about the love of God through Christ, and the efficacy of real faith.

There are several objections to the popular view. The obvious one is expressed by asking: "Where was Jesus that day: And the next day? And the day after that?" It was several weeks later when he ascended to heaven; and any interpretation that requires us to believe that he went to heaven immediately must be wrong.

Proceeding more positively, we note that the request to be remembered in the kingdom is answered by the promise of a place

in paradise. It seems reasonable therefore to equate the kingdom with paradise. There is ample confirmation of this idea. The word “paradise” means a garden. The original garden was in Eden; and the concluding chapters of Revelation make it clear that the establishment of the kingdom is to be thought of as the restoration of Eden. Now see how the word “paradise” is applied to the Eden of the future in Rev. 2: 7: “To him that over-cometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God”. Clearly then the Lord was promising the thief a place in his kingdom. This promise would be fulfilled in the distant future, and not on that very day.

However, there is still a difficulty. Although there are excellent reasons for rejecting the idea that the promise would receive an immediate fulfilment, the form of words, “Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise”, still sounds like a promise to be fulfilled on that very day. At this stage we can only hand on some suggestions. We are probably familiar with the explanation that says that the translators have punctuated the passage wrongly. It is contended that if the comma were placed after “to day”, instead of before it (“Verily I say unto thee to day,”), there would be no problem. The suggestion is not an unreasonable one. There were no commas in the early manuscripts, nor, for that matter, were there spaces between the words. The translators would make their own decisions concerning punctuation, and they could have made a mistake here, as they certainly did by the omission of a necessary comma in Acts 19: 12 (“so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons”).

It is argued that, in linking “to day” with “Verily I say unto thee”, a familiar Hebrew idiom of emphasis would be employed. Some are not happy about this explanation because, after moving the comma, it also becomes necessary to change “shalt thou” into “thou shalt”. This is no real difficulty. If the translators had put the comma after “to day”, they would themselves have written “thou shalt”. But because they decided to link the word “to day”, with the terms of the promise, they adopted the inverted form, “shalt thou”, which in old English would be more elegant. It is purely a matter of translation.

Another suggestion (that does not commend itself to us) is that because the dead are unconscious, the day of resurrection would seem to follow immediately after the moment of

death. It would all seem to happen “to day”. This is doubtless true, but is this the truth that the passage is expressing?

Yet another suggestion (that appeals more to us) is this: When God determines something, it is as good as done. The purpose is so sure that time is no obstacle. Thus we read that God “quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Rom. 4: 17). Adam was as good as dead when the forbidden fruit was eaten. And, conversely, the repentant thief was as good as in the kingdom when the unconditional promise was made.

There is another controversial question connected with the thief on the cross and, although it has nothing to do with death and resurrection, it might be opportune to deal with it now. It concerns baptism. When we urge the necessity of baptism for salvation, we are sometimes asked how the thief on the cross could have been baptized. The following points are suggested in answer:

- 1) There is no authority for saying that the thief was unbaptized. He may have been baptized earlier.
- 2) Even if he had not been baptized earlier, it provides no excuse for other people. It was impossible for the thief to be baptized when he was hanging on the cross. It is not usually impossible for the people who make this excuse.
- 3) From Romans 6 we learn that baptism is a symbol of crucifixion with Christ. Suppose the thief had not been baptized; he had suffered the “real thing” - crucifixion with Christ, of which baptism was but a sign. And we learn from his noble confession of worthiness to die, that he fully entered into the spirit of the act, too.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16)

This parable is a favourite with those who believe in the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and the related doctrine of hell torments. The verses to which reference is made read thus: “... the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame” (vv. 22-24).

The story in question is undoubtedly a parable, although the word “parable” is not attached to it. It is one of a series. The two parables immediately before it are those of the “Prodigal

Son” and the “Unjust Steward”. Luke does not call these other two stories parables either: but who would dare suggest that they are not? Note how all three begin similarly: The Prodigal Son — “A certain man had two sons... “; The Unjust Steward — “There was a certain rich man”; The Rich Man and Lazarus - “There was a certain rich man... “. If the third story in the series is a historical account (as some people contend), then, to be consistent, the two preceding stories must be regarded as historical accounts too.

It is a parable: what then? “The legs of the lame are not equal: so is a parable in the mouth of fools” (Prov. 26: 7). This is one of several passages that caution us against mishandling parables. Certainly it is not fair treatment to base a doctrine upon the literal meaning of an elaborate piece of figurative writing. It is particularly offensive to make the literal meaning of a parable the basis for beliefs that conflict with plain Bible teaching. The Bible teaches clearly that death involves a cessation of life, and that judgment follows resurrection from the dead. Those who try to force conflicting beliefs from the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus are doing violence to Scripture.

It is strange how inconsistent people can be. The literal detail of the parable is often quoted to prove that the wicked go to hell torments, but never to prove that the righteous go to Abraham’s bosom. Nor is it explained why the souls of the deceased in the parable have bodily parts, like fingers and tongue, and thus do not conform to the popular pattern. Let those who insist that we must accept the literal details of the parable as facts, accept all the details themselves, and not just those that suit their theories.

It is not necessary here to suggest an explanation of this difficult parable; but perhaps we should try to explain why the Lord Jesus made such a strange story the basis for his instruction. The context shows that the parable was directed against the Pharisees. The Pharisees believed that men were rewarded or punished in the way described in the parable. It was a belief in the immortality of the soul that differed in detail from the more modern theories. The Lord Jesus rebuked the spiritual irresponsiveness of the Pharisees in terms that they would readily understand. He was condemning them by their own logic. The following quotation from Josephus is relevant: “The Pharisees also believe that souls have an immortal

vigour in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards or punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again” (Ant. xviii. i. 3).

Another good example of the same sort of argument — where the Lord Jesus confounds his adversaries on their own ground, so to speak - is provided in Luke 11. When he was accused of casting out devils through Beelzebub the chief of the devils, Jesus replied: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth. If Satan also be divided against himself, how shall his kingdom stand? because ye say that I cast out devils through Beelzebub. And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your sons cast them out? therefore shall they be your judges. But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you”. It is easy to see that Jesus did not really believe in Beelzebub — he was taking their absurd contention to its logical conclusion. If anyone should challenge this proposition, we would refer them to the parallel account in Mark, where the Lord’s answer is introduced by the words: “He... said unto them **in parables...**” (3: 23).

The Spirits in Prison.

For Christ also hath... suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water” (1 Peter 3: 18-20). The questions we shall try to answer here are: Who, or what, are the spirits in prison? When did Christ preach to them?

It is always helpful to consider the context of difficult scriptures. Here it is quite impossible to understand the passage without studying the verses preceding it. We recommend, in fact, the reading of the whole of the first epistle — here and now.

One of the great themes of Peter’s first epistle is suffering. We are called upon to suffer for well doing, and we must endure it patiently. The great example is Christ: “For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called:

because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2: 20-22).

Peter returns to this theme in chapter 3, and develops it. Again he refers to the example: “For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing. For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust...” See how, after expanding a little on certain thoughts concerning Christ’s suffering (thoughts from which our questions are drawn), he “picks up the threads” and returns to the main line of his argument - the need to accept suffering — in chapter 4: “Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin” (v. 1).

Now let us look more closely at v. 18. Peter explains that there is a very good reason why men ought to be impressed by Christ’s example of suffering: their own reconciliation to God has been effected by it: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, **that he might bring us to God**”. How can the suffering of Christ bring men to God? We read on: “... being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: **by which also he went** and preached unto the spirits in prison...”

We can already see the possibility of a link between Christ’s bringing “us to God”, and his preaching “unto the spirits in prison”. May we suggest here that those who were brought unto God, were, formerly, the spirits in prison? It was by the preaching of Christ that the reconciliation was effected.

But how did the suffering of Christ enable him to perform this work of preaching and reconciliation? Observe that it was **by the Spirit** that Christ preached — and that the Spirit prevailed **because the flesh was crucified**. Again we quote the relevant parts of vv. 18, 19: “Christ hath once suffered... that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit; by which also he went and preached...”

It will be understood already that the flesh and the Spirit are opposites, and enemies. Each develops at the expense of the other. When one suffers the other thrives. When one dies the other lives. The Spirit was strong in Christ because the impulses of the flesh were mortified. He was quickened by the Spirit because he permitted the flesh to be put to death. The sequence of thought then is: Christ suffered in the flesh; and was therefore quickened by (or “in” R.V.) the Spirit; the Spirit, which was strong because the flesh had suffered, enabled him

to preach and bring men to God; therefore those reconciled to God ought to appreciate Christ's suffering, and follow his example in enduring patiently.

When did Christ preach to the imprisoned spirits. Since his death and resurrection are referred to in the previous verse, it seems possible that the reference is to his preaching, through his spirit-equipped apostles, after the resurrection. There is no need to be dogmatic about this however. The reference could be to Christ's preaching before his crucifixion — because then too he was equipped with Spirit power because he had mortified the impulses of the flesh.

But why are those who later became reconciled to God described as “spirits in prison”? Let us think again of the mutual hostility of flesh and Spirit. The flesh of Christ was put to death that the Spirit might live — and save. But what of those whom he had come to save? It was the flesh that lived in them; their “spirits” — that is the spiritual part of them — were as good as dead. Indeed the word “dead” is used in this connection in 4: 6: “For this cause was the gospel preached also to them that are dead”.

But why are those who are spiritually dead called “spirits **in prison**”? Because prisons can be opened and imprisoned spirits can be set free. The preaching of Christ, through the Spirit, gave freedom and life to the imprisoned spirits of those who lived in the flesh. Remember now the words of Isa. 61: 1 which the Lord Jesus applied to himself: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek... **to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound**”.

The fact that the Lord Jesus refers this to himself in Luke 4, makes it clear that the spirits in prison are those bound by sin. Indeed, his claim, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”, could lend support to the idea that the preaching to the spirits in prison was done before the crucifixion, rather than through the apostles, after the resurrection.

Peter goes on to say that there were imprisoned spirits in Noah's day too: “... which aforetime (R. V) were disobedient when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah...” (v. 20). A few of these imprisoned spirits obtained freedom by passing through the water in an ark; and Peter continues, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us... by the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v. 21).

“He is not a God of the dead, but of the living! for all live unto him:” (Luke 20: 38).

We will be in a better position to discuss the problem presented by these words if we look at them in their setting. The Lord Jesus is contending with the Sadducees about resurrection. He says: “Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him” (Luke 20: 37, 38).

It is sometimes urged that the Lord was here teaching that the soul was immortal. God is not the God of the dead: yet He is the God of the dead Abraham. The essential part of Abraham must therefore be still alive. “All live unto him”. Very facile! Even so, those who argue like this earn the same rebuke as the Sadducees: “Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures...” (Matt. 22: 29).

The Lord Jesus was proving **the resurrection**: “Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed...” Those who think they can see, in the Lord’s words, a proof that man has an immortal soul are not even reading the passage properly. Whether we understand the Lord’s words or not, we must acknowledge that they are designed to teach resurrection.

But the argument is not really difficult to understand. God is not a God of the dead. Yet He claims to be the God of certain people who have died. Their resurrection is so sure that God regards it as an accomplished fact even before it happens. “God... raiseth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were” (Rom. 4: 17). This is Paul’s way of expressing this great principle. It is significant that he, too, is concerned with resurrection — and with Abraham. **“Raised incorruptible”** (1 Cor. 15: 52)

One gets the impression that many are embarrassed by this well-known passage from 1 Corinthians 15. There is ample scriptural testimony to the fact that the dead will not emerge from their graves with immortal bodies: yet Paul’s words seem to say the opposite.

It is always a good rule to study the context, and here it gives us some vital clues. The whole of 1 Corinthians 15 is concerned with resurrection, and a new section of the argument commences with v, 35. Paul raises the question that some would want to ask: “How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come?” In answer he refers to the growth

of plants from seeds: “Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain...” (vv. 36, 37),

The same metaphor is carried on to verses 42-44: “So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption: it is raised in incorruption... it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body... “ He introduces a quotation here to support his statement that there is a natural body: “The first Adam was made of a living soul”. We recognize these words as coming from Gen. 2: 7 — the account of Adam’s creation.

Paul does not linger here. He goes straight on to say: “... the last Adam was made a quickening spirit”. In agricultural terms then, a natural body is sown, and a spiritual body is raised. The creation of Adam is like a seed cast upon the earth. The glorification of Christ is like the fully-developed plant that has sprung from that same seed. Observe that the seed-plant metaphor is appropriate in several respects:-

- i The plant only develops through the destruction of the seed (“That which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die” v. 36).
- ii The fully developed plant bears little resemblance to the seed from which it develops (“Thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain” v. 37).
- iii The seed is feeble, but the ultimate plant is strong and flourishing.

Note especially that Paul is not concerned with detailed processes here. He goes straight from “bare grain” to mature plant; from corruptible Adam to incorruptible Christ; from the image of the earthy (borne by those “in Adam”) to the image of the heavenly (borne by those “in Christ”). The only intervening detail that he mentions is that “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”.

When therefore Paul says that the dead shall be raised incorruptible, he is referring to the final elevation to spirit nature, and is not particularly concerned with processes - like baptism, forgiveness of sins, faithful discipleship, death, physical resurrection, judgment - that lead to this final glorification. Indeed, it seems likely that he has carried his seed-plant metaphor forward to v. 52, and that he wants us to regard the raising of a plant as the basis when he says, “The dead shall be raised incorruptible.” The expression is very similar to that found in v. 42

“It is sown In corruption; it is raised in incorruption”; and here the word “raised” is obviously used metaphorically, as the antithesis of “sown” in the same verse.

The Souls under the Altar.

“And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: and they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long! O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellowservants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled”. (Rev. 6: 9-11).

The souls of them that are slain are represented here as pleading with God. It is not surprising that those who believe that souls are immortal should make use of this passage. But does it really help them? The “souls” in this passage do not conform to the popular pattern. They are neither in heaven nor hell (in the orthodox sense); nor are they in purgatory. They are “under the altar”, pleading to be avenged. Those who say this passage teaches the doctrine of the immortality of the soul have themselves some explaining to do.

It is hardly necessary to state here that there is a great concentration of symbology in the book of Revelation; and that the words in question have to be interpreted, rather than taken literally. Let us then proceed to interpret. The imagery seems to be drawn from two sources: the sacrificial pouring out of blood beneath the altar, under the Mosaic Law; and the shedding of the blood of Abel.

Abel was slain when he had offered an acceptable sacrifice to God. The righteous offerer himself became an offering. In this he was a type of Christ. After the death of Abel, Cain, the murderer, was told: “The voice of thy brother’s blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother’s blood from thy hand...” (Gen. 4: 10) Though Abel’s blood cried out, the man, Abel, was silent. An interesting figure of speech is employed here, which has a modern equivalent. Today, we would say, “His martyrdom **demand**ed God’s intervention”.

The thought is developed in Heb. 12: 24: (Ye are come...

to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel". Abel's blood demanded vengeance; but the blood of Christ called for mercy. The antitype is greater than the type. Abel, the first martyr, is not only a type of Christ: he is the prototype of all martyrs. Thus the Lord says in Matt. 23: 35: "Upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. It is not surprising then that the sacrificed lives of Abel's successors, the martyrs of Revelation 6, should be represented as calling for vengeance, as Abel's blood had done.

The word "soul" in this passage (Greek "psuche") need not trouble us. A Concordance reveals that it is a fairly elastic word - though its elasticity can never be stretched to include immortality. Perhaps the most common meaning of the word is "life". Of the Lord Jesus it is written, "He hath poured out his soul unto death"; (Isa. 53: 12). Expressing it more literally, the Lord's life-blood was poured out. And so with these martyrs. The life or soul is in the blood, and their life-blood was poured out just as that of the sacrificial beast was poured beneath the altar. Thus they plead: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our **blood**...?"