

Thoughts from the Word of God.

A LETTER TO AN ASSEMBLY OF SAVED ONES, AND OTHERS WHO WOULD PLEASE GOD.

ON BIBLE DIFFICULTIES.

DEAR FELLOW BELIEVERS,

It is a wondrous thing to be called out of darkness into light (1 Pet. ii. 9), and if we *walk* in the light, in God's light we shall *see* light, and His Word will be as a light to our path. Scripture is not merely a Book of problems: the Word of God *unfolds* and *explains* His ways. So many rather view it as only full of difficulties, and almost dry bones. This is through lack of communion with the Author.

But though the Spirit of God in this, as in other things, lovingly helpeth our infirmities, we must not imagine that He thus makes unnecessary the "gifts" of our risen Lord Jesus. We are linked with one another, and as in a body the *mouth* is not the whole, so all saved ones have not the same spheres of service. This needs emphasis, because, in revolt from priestly exaltation, and in realization of the *One Meditor* between God and man, and in solemn remembrance that *false* teachers are prophesied (2 Pet. ii. 1), and, moreover, that every one of us shall give an account of *himself* to God (Rom. xiv. 12), we are apt to forget that 1 John ii. 27 is made clear by the context (note 26, John x. 5, God's people have within them a holy instinct to dread seducing doctrines, unless they smother it), and that even when this passage was most fully illustrated, in the possession of the baptism in and anointing of the Holy Spirit, the Lord gave some, pastors and teachers, (Eph. iv. 11). And, moreover, though we are sure, by grace, that the *wise* shall understand (Dan. xii. 10, Hos. xiv. 9), yet now we know *in part*, and Scripture is written to test our *perseverance* and obedience to 1 Cor. ii. 13, last clause. There are "Some things hard to be understood" (2 Pet. iii. 16), and our repeated failures in life impress the heart searching thought that all sin makes Scripture harder (Heb. v. 11).

But our merciful God, forgiving our iniquities, graciously overrules our very sense of ignorance to make us pray more, and to act more *together*, that we may know the things which are freely given us of God. And, in general, it may be said that "Bible Difficulties" not only *humble*, but *deepen* the study, so that there is oft a richer harvest than in any other way from prayerful consideration of something that at first perplexes;

if the work be not merely mental, or with a debating spirit, or with a natural thirst for knowledge and the accompanying "reputation."

Shall we prayerfully examine *together* one "Bible Difficulty" that will help as to further difficulties, and also cause us to mourn over errors, and the fleshly perverting and sad leavening of God's precious Word?

In 1 Pet. iii. 19 we read about "spirits in prison" and in 1 Pet. iv. 6 of the gospel preached to these dead. Now these passages, rightly understood, are some of the strongest, or rather *clearest* evidences against both purgatory, and the more popular, man-deluding notion of "a second chance." Let us note the context. 1 Pet. iii. tells us we shall suffer, but no harm will really be done (13) for there is resurrection (10 with 21, 22). The Lord Jesus is shown, (cf. ch. 2), as our Example, but He also suffered for sins (17, 18). It was only as to the flesh He was put to death—He did not *cease to exist*, why should we be discouraged? And so He was "*made alive*" (quickened). Yes, He had "*an eternal spirit*" through which He could be both offered and offering (Heb. ix. 14). But these thoughts suggest that there are, however, *some* for whom death is *terrible*. And, further, that the unpopularity connected with persecution is nothing strange (1 Pet. iv. 12). If the end of all things is at hand (1 Pet. iv. 7), the *present* days should be something like the days of Noah (Matt. xxiv. 37). Ah, yes, God's long suffering is waiting now on earth *as it was then*, (it is noteworthy that the long suffering is definitely separated from the reference to being in prison). And this lays stress on the parallel, to encourage the saints against despondency. Was not God's Spirit then witnessing among men (Gen. vi. 3, lit.: *judge among*, cf. Heb. xi. 7, condemn=judge against, John xvi. 8), and does not Peter, in this very epistle, in showing the Deity of Christ, say that this Spirit was the Spirit of Christ? (1 Pet. i. 11). Then Christ Himself was rejected before His earthly life, during it, and after it when working with His servants (Mark xvi. 20, Eph. ii. 17)! We are only like Him when refused. He preached, or heralded in Noah: this very name being applied to Noah in 2 Pet. ii. 5. The verb here used in no way assumes the hearers accepted. What then? They condemned the King's heralding, and they became spirits in the King's prison, and thus are naturally described according to their *present* condition, even as we say "*King Edward was born in 1841*," or that Abraham was on the east of Bethel (Gen. xii. 8, with xxviii. 19), cf. Dan. viii. 10. This name is given to show they had no second chance, that their death was not the end of them, they are now spirits in prison. Any *other* exegesis is usually through a *wish* against God's judgments, and unmindful of the *decisive* words in Gen. vi.,

(without which this passage cannot be easily explained, for it is referring thereto). In Gen. vi. we have man described as "*flesh wherein is the spirit of life*," (17); then the end of all *flesh* comes (13), and man is destroyed as to the earth (note repetition 11, 12, 13, 17): hence he becomes only a *spirit*, and not on the earth's surface, but in *prison*. 1 Pet. iv. 6 confirms this interpretation, for the *gospel was preached*, not merely was there a heralding of righteousness, to those who are dead, that they might be judged in men's law courts as to the flesh. How can this be? Men's law courts cannot judge *after* death! But this seems the order! Then these must be *now* dead, not dead when they heard the gospel, and were judged by men. But why were they condemned? Were they criminals? Nay, the gospel was preached *that they might be judged*. Hence they died *for the gospel* (cf. 14-16). These are saved ones, and so they *live according to God's law court*, i.e. they are righteous, they live in the spirit, though not in the flesh. Here is their *intermediate* state: they are the *contrasts* to the spirits in prison, and the thought is—Better have men's judgment now, than God's judgment hereafter (cf. 17). The believer standing before a *cruel tribunal* is oft brought before us in this epistle (ii. 23, iii. 15, 16, iv. 16, v. 9).

To return to ch. iii. The preaching is *dated*. "When once the long suffering of God waited." 'Tis not said, let it again be noticed, that those who died then have long-suffering still. There is a contrast. 'Tis prison *now*. Why then the word "*went*" and not "*came*"? These men lived in "*the old world*," according to the same inspired writer. Hence everything is appropriate, there is a parallel for every difficulty, and the awful judgment of the ungodly is emphasized upon us, and we are stimulated not to give way, though only a "*few*" believe. We may be unkindly treated, but those who reject shall give account to Him That is ready to judge the quick and the dead (iv. 5). Our light affliction is but for a moment, but oh, how solemn is the thought leading us to go on witnessing at all costs, that those who despise and cause us tribulation shall have tribulation (2 Thess. i. 6, 7), for the Lord *will* compensate, and righteous vengeance is His (Rom. xii. 19).

Similar, prayerful, verbal and contextual study, especially in comparison of earlier Scriptures referred to, will be helpful, in the Spirit, as to other difficulties, and let there ever be praise and practical godliness as a result.

Yours earnestly in Christ, all by grace,

PERCY W. HEWARD.