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GOD'S GRACIOUS PROVISION FOR HIS PEOPLE IN THE
HANDING DOWN OF HIS TRUTH.

Our subject is a very precious one, and should awaken praise. It is entitled "God's gracious provision for His people in the handing down of His truth". Surely, beloved friends, we are I think, of one mind as to the precious fact that the Lord HAS tender mercies over all His works. He has manifested MARVELLOUS forbearance, and, moreover, He is good to all. He makes His sun to shine, He sendeth rain, He is the Preserver of all men, but there are also ADDED privileges to those that believe. He is Preserver of all - else surely this physical frame would soon be brought to death. How often the unsaved are preserved. We notice, too, the providential care of God for infants. Then there is the providential care over those who in drunken madness spend many days of their brief but wasted life. It is marvellous to notice how often an accident is averted in God's wise providence, but there is a special blessing to those who have faith(1 Tim. 4.10). God arranges everything for His people, He gives Egypt for their ransom and Ethiopia and Sheba for them. He will give men for them, and people for their life; so wondrously dear are God's people to Himself. We do well to have this impressed upon our hearts, we do well to rejoice in it. God has thought of us, He has never done anything else, He has never been contrary to thinking of us, He has never forgotten us. He loved us before we were created, He loved us although He foreknew how we would sin, and He has made wonderful provision for us, and has included in this provision the sacred Scriptures. Of necessity, this subject is part of a larger one, and the larger one brings before us God's control of everything in the whole universe, with a view to the glory of His Name and the blessing of His people and the salvation of souls. Not all inspired Scriptures have been KEPT to us. God's gracious provision for His people does not mean that He has preserved everything upon EARTH. He did not intend to do so. There are some who have made a great point of the fact that certain inspired Scriptures have been lost. They said "Do you mean to tell us that inspired books no longer exist?" We answer, This thought is no trouble to us, no difficulty. So far as WE are concerned,

today, these books no longer exist. God has a record of everything; we do not doubt His knowledge of every book that was written at any time. He has never forgotten one fact. It is impossible for God not to know beforehand, it is impossible for Him to forget afterwards. Unless He Himself puts a thing aside, it remains with Him, and, therefore, we cannot say in one sense that the books are "lost". They have not been kept for US. What should we have done if all the inspired words had been kept for us? We should have sat down all the day, and read them and had no other time. Those who make an objection to the thought of an inspired book being lost, forget that the Lord Jesus Christ walked this earth thirty years, and ALWAYS said perfect words. If it is a sad thing for a book to be lost, what about His words? If we possessed a book of ALL His words and ALL His works, fully explained, there would be no room for us in the world. The world itself could not contain the books which should be written, and therefore, beloved friends, we must understand that a large portion of God's working has NOT been kept for us. A large portion has been put on one side, so far as we are concerned. Nor is this extraordinary if we view the Divine arrangement from another standpoint. The food we eat this year benefits us next year, if the Lord spares us. Its immediate result is not seen. Many portions of Truth which God caused to be written hundreds of years ago, if they have not been preserved, influenced saints through whom we have been influenced, and we have the effect to this day. This leads us back to last week's subject. God has used myriads of things to have an influence upon us, even though these things themselves are no longer present to us. We cannot, therefore, speak of the books being lost, they have whatever results He appointed and He did NOT wish us to read all the books. We have illustrations of this, if I mistake not in the books of Kings and Chronicles. You read for example about the Volume of Iddo the seer. You are reminded there that there were certain writings of other prophets which were apparently inspired. The epistles certainly give us some of the apostle's messages but God has not kept everything. Though we are not told that the epistle which Paul mentions in the epistle to the Colossians was another epistle to that of the Ephesians there is nothing extraordinary for us to conceive that certain epistles of God's servant Paul were written, beyond the fourteen which we have. I can hardly think that dear man of God only wrote fourteen epistles in his life, or only wrote fourteen

letters which were inspired. Why, beloved friends, even we, if our heart's love is drawn out to others, write more than fourteen letters in a lifetime. Surely God's servant did much more than this, and though we do not know whether we can assume he spoke by inspiration at every meeting, yet many of his inspired addresses were a blessing then, but are not handed down. Can you find ^{one} complete address which has been handed down? Surely you do not say the address of Matthew 5, 6 and 7 contains everything that Christ said on that occasion. There is no proof of this. You do not think that we have a complete record of what the Lord said in various parables. We have no proof that certain addresses handed down contain a complete account. It may be, or may not be. Many epistles seem to imply that we get but extracts. God's servant Paul sometimes preached at great length. We know that, and yet we have not such an address. Some of us would like, at least our natural inclination is to say we would like to have a complete report of an address perhaps an hour or two long of God's servant Paul. What a wondrous record it would be. But these things are not handed down. Just as God arranged in nature many things are lost, many of these beautiful flowers are never seen by human eyes, so many precious things as to written inspiration have not been preserved in Scripture. God has preserved whatever He chose to preserve and that is all. And so we approach the thought of the COMPLETENESS of Scripture. The Lord Jesus alluded to the Old Testament Scripture as complete - the law, the prophets and the psalms. He regarded the book as one whole. I suppose the completeness of Scripture is illustrated by its structure. And, moreover, do we not find there all that is needed? Have you ever reached a subject as to which you have found Scripture incomplete? The applications of God's truth in daily life illustrate the fact that God has given US a complete book. Oftentimes we should have found a longer book shorter. What I mean is this. Sometimes the omission of words gives a TWOFOLD application. Sometimes two "omitted" words enable us to have three or four suggestive thoughts. Scripture is not written with a completeness of human arrangement, but is perfectly complete from God's standpoint. Complete in providing literature of all kinds, and guidance in all circumstances.

The way in which the Old Testament and the New Testament alike and would alike prove that God has arranged a certain structure, and has given a completeness. But how did God guarantee what was His truth? This is an important question. I dare say we have all heard it at times. The foolish words of those who have grasped hold of unfounded traditions and have told us that no one knew what was Scripture till the fourth century, and that then certain books were said to have wrought certain miracles in the way in which they all came together, and the leaders of Christendom claimed thereby to know what was inspired and what was not. My own impression is that, by the grace of God, we have sufficient distrust of so-called "church councils" to feel that such an explanation of the canon of Scripture is without any warrant at all. Beloved friends, this tradition appears to be something like the Setuagint tradition. You have heard that empty story. Some say there were seventy men, each of them knowing seventy languages, and they all brought their Greek translation and then when these translations were compared, they were all the same, all entirely like one another. I need hardly say that this is a BARE tradition and totally incorrect. The Septuagint is by no means perfect: it was not produced in that manner, nor could there be found seventy men who each knew seventy languages. The idea is made up, and not at all appropriate. It has no warrant from Scripture or history, and no warrant to encourage our faith.

No beloved friends, it was not a church council the Lord marked out what was for His parts of Scripture are so arranged that they refer to one another. Paul quotes Luke's gospel, and quotes it as Scripture. Peter marks out that he was the writer of the two epistles and possibly implies that Paul wrote the epistle to the Hebrews, thus claiming the inspiration of certain books. What I mean is this, if the authority of one book is set forth, the authority of other linked books is interlocked. There is an entwining. But in what way apart from this did God mark out His books? Not only did He arrange that different writings referred to other writings, but He was pleased at the outset to give certain apostles and prophets, who were inspired, and thus He was pleased to give men who were acquainted with inspired books and able to indicate. Afterwards He caused others to be trustees of these books. When we refer to different so-called church fathers and so-called councils, in this connection,

people think we are referring to tradition. Let me carefully distinguish two things. I suppose you agree with me we cannot accept our interpretation of Scripture from the Jews. But we find the Jews have been very exact and careful in handing down the Hebrew Scriptures even though the Hebrew Scriptures witness against themselves. Now I can accept, beloved friends, the testimony of Israel from the historical standpoint when I cannot accept their interpretation at all. It is so in the present dispensation. We cannot acknowledge the 'fathers' so-called, we cannot acknowledge THEIR AUTHORITY, but there were living men at the times of the apostles, and just a little later, and they were custodians of the books. Some of them had seen the apostles, others had seen those who had seen the apostles, and in days when books were far more valued since they were fewer, and had a certain definite history, it was well-known who wrote this book and how it was handed down. The books were jealously guarded. At the present time, if you obtain a book, it is easy to lose it, and you think "I can easily buy another". But in olden days books were not so easily available and the result was there was far more care for the books. All these old manuscripts were guarded, their history was known. A so-called church father could not write an inspired epistle to the Ephesians, but I am willing to accept the testimony of a reasonable man as to the historical facts with which he was acquainted. I would not acknowledge the interpretation of Scripture given by an average man of the world, but if certain ordinary reasonable and honourable men said they had brought me a certain letter which you had given them, I should not say "My friend, if you cannot interpret that letter, I do not believe you brought it" I should recognize they could carry it without understanding it. There is a vast difference between the two. The postman during this week may have brought you letters from different parts of the world. They bear the evidence that they have come from different parts of the world, and you have the facts brought before you, but the interpretation might be quite unknown to those who have handled them. Let us carefully distinguish between a witness of fact which can be ordinarily known by ordinary men, and a testimony to the interpretation of Scripture which requires the special guidance of the Holy Ghost and in addition a heart able to keep the precious faith (as 1 Cor. 2 makes clear).

Secondly, these books that were marked out among these professing the name of Christ as books written by the apostles, were kept by God in the gatherings of those days. Oftentimes objections are raised, why do not OTHERwriters refer to Scripture? Why is there not fuller evidence? A most remarkable fact is linked with this - and as to the biography of the Lord Jesus Christ, for example. We bring forward the best circulated books of antiquity, which have more copies dating back hundreds of years further than any other books. I refer to the gospels. We bring them forward and say, Here are four evidences. The critic often first objects to them because they do not (in his opinion) "agree" together. But we bring them forward and say, Here are four testimonies. Then he changes his ground and says that they are all parts of ONE book. It is hopeless to deal with a man in that condition. If it suits him, he says they are all one, If it suits him, he says they are all different, and he casts away all your evidence, and says, "Now give me some more"; and if you produced more, he would still cast them away. The majority of people seem to think they are bearing strong witness against some of the wonderful facts in connection with the Lord Jesus when they say that other writers do not refer to Him. This is NOT true, but as to SOME events, no other writers refer to Him. Would you expect that they should refer to everything? Do you think that in those days there were hundreds of writers whose books have been handed down? Not at all. There are only, let me say, two or three historians who deal with that period, whose books have reached us, and among these very very few historians whose books have reached us, we DO have reference to the Lord Jesus. But we must remember He was miles away from where they were writing. If the critics could produce several contemporary historians who lived at Jerusalem, who did not refer to these things, they would have some force in their objection. But we must also remember our beloved Lord was despised and rejected of men. There are many facts of antiquity that have only recently been discovered. Some of the greatest monarchs of olden times have only just been discovered, so fully has past history been buried, and yet the foolish heart of the natural man objects to the strong evidence we can hand down referring to the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

To return, we have a number of books written by apostles themselves. But you say, "Surely one or two of the books are not

written by apostles". Granted. Luke claims perfect inspiration from above, and Paul especially refers to the writing of Luke as inspired Scripture and I venture to add that when we come to compare this book with other books of the same period, the internal evidence is a mighty witness. Compare Scripture with the works of professing christian writers of the second and third centuries and see the contrast.

But finally we must come back to the fact that the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God. Hence the strongest evidence of Christ and the truth of Scripture is the believing heart's recognition in the power of the Holy Spirit. A man will say to us, "Prove this to me". Everything depends on who the man is. The natural man receiveth NOT the things of the Spirit of God, and as some of us have said to certain ones who have opposed the Truth, "My friend, if we could prove it to you, we should disprove it, for itself says it cannot be proved to you" God has given the plain testimony, the natural man receiveth not. But the heart of God's true people, realizes the truth of Scripture. Here is a marvellous fact. This complete book, written by many different men, with evidently different vocabularies, different standpoints, different educational abilities - a book of a uniquely complex character, provides no contradictions, provides nothing which has been proved false by subsequent history or well-founded scientific researches, and beyond this, the internal evidence applied in power by the Holy Spirit to the believing heart is an evidence which can never be turned aside. There is no parallel with this miracle. UNBELIEF would be too credulous. Faith is the true inference. But let me add that though the believer may be interested to see how the canon of Scripture, or the books which are now found in it, was formed, he may be interested to hear there were those who ^{were} acknowledged by all as the writer of this epistle and so forth, but, beloved friends, this is NOT the primary thought to me, nor I think is it the primary thought with you. If God granted the books were anonymous, He could put in them an overpowering sense of their authority and inspiration, and He could work that we should be blessedly convinced.

Salvation is a definite work, and the acceptance of the truth is a definite work. You may make a man religious by outward

pressure, you can make a man accept certain historical facts by mental reasoning, but inasmuch as even a Paul sometimes made mistakes in his daily life, the proof of inspiration of the WRITINGS must be deeper than bare history. (Observe the CLAIMED inspiration. A bad man could not have written the Scriptures by himself, a good man would not have combined such a claim with unique truth, unless it were true. And the books are infinitely beyond the efforts of an "enthusiast" who "THOUGHT" he was inspired). It must be the EVIDENTIAL WORKING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: - and unless you tell me there are infallible apostles who have never made a mistake in their daily walk, you are compelled to go back to this final issue - God has convicted us, and as salvation is supernatural so Christian evidences are also supernatural. It is true that history corroborates but the primary evidence is supernatural, and it is this which draws believers away from spending too large a portion of their time upon the earthly dates and data. They realize that it is the Spirit Who quickeneth and the Spirit Who proves the truth to the heart of God's dear people. Many things may be said to throw down the objections of man, but although objections are thrown down, the natural heart is a natural heart still. God makes alive and God causes in the heart a harmony with that which He has caused to be written in the word of Truth.

It is interesting to notice furthermore, how God watched over manuscripts. The earliest manuscripts do not exist, nor is this strange. The apostles were not wealthy men, and they wrote as it would seem on common writing materials. But God has not been pleased to give a succession of miracles. His usual method is to give a miracle, and then entrust the miracle to the care of those who will fail in their keeping it. When the Lord raised Lazarus, He gave the others the work of loosing the limbs. When the Lord raised the little girl, He told the parents to supply food. After a miracle, the Lord usually gives a responsibility. So He gave miraculously the Scriptures, but the care of these was entrusted to man, and as in everything, man failed. There are many who will tell us that the fact there are various readings is an argument against Scripture. Now let us weigh us what thus means. We have hundreds of manuscripts of Scripture. Some ancient writers of great fame have preserved one manuscript or two manuscripts. Many of the ancient

books, which were very famous in their days, have not been handed down, these fragments. Contrast the Scripture. Have you ever thought that when a book has only one manuscript handed down, there are no difficulties as to various readings? The whole problem is solved. Would you like the difficulty of Scripture to be solved in this way? Of course not, beloved friends. Have you ever realized that the difficulty of various readings is a great help. For one man wrote a manuscript in one town, another in another town and another in another town, and these books have all been handed down, and when you find in (shall we say) 59 words out of sixty they are "together", you say this is better than having one manuscript without anything to check it. Here is the evidence that the Scriptures circulated in all parts of the world were the same. There was no opportunity for the falsifying of Scripture. The books were too widely circulated. Ordinary falsifying is easily found out, under such conditions. Let me explain what I mean. Sometimes a word was written in the margin as an explanation; the next writer incorporated it. Others did the same. The result is, many manuscripts written in one district may retain the same incorporation, others written in another district may leave it out. You check the two together. But is it not possible that those written in another district left out a word by mistake when the writer copied it? Quite possible. Sometimes therefore you cannot say definitely "This is put in" or "This is left out". You cannot say WHERE the mistake is. But the fact that the difference exists tells us there is ONE WORD which you cannot apply in argument. You do not know what the mistake is, but you know there is a mistake. That is sufficient, for us at the present time. It was impossible to falsify the Scripture and hide this up. The wide circulation involved the handing down of evidence as to the mistake. The Scriptures were too much circulated to allow of corruption and a covering up. Some other manuscripts written a long way off can be brought forward to give their testimony, and all tend to make us careful. Moreover, when people tells us the gospels were not written till the fourth century, and so forth, we reply "It is very extraordinary they were QUOTED and even translated before they were written". It is remarkable we have so many quotations in earlier writers, earlier than the fourth century; remarkable that we have the books referred to by name in a way that shows they were the same books as we now use.

But some will say that they were written afterwards to agree with the quotations before hand. Apart from the remarkable skill that would be required for such extraordinary forgeries, there was no time in which such rearrangement was possible. The wide circulation of the new books and then the losing of the books to which there were references made, would demand a miracle. Human theories are often beyond all human conception. There was no room for the imagined falsification, there was no room for this tremendous change. The only possible interpretation is that we have books handed down from the days of the apostles, preserved by careful custodians ever since, and in such a way that the manuscript differences are brought before us to prevent our building on any doubtful word. Some will tell us that because we have manuscript differences we do not know what the inspired Scripture is. They will say, "You have not obtained verbal inspiration". But such an objection is a confusion of two things. We say that God's words as originally written were perfectly inspired. They reply What is the value of this thought if some word has been altered since? We answer, "If we had ONE manuscript which might have been altered a GREAT deal, and altered uncertainly, there would be some force in your objection", but when the multitude of manuscripts show us WHICH are the doubtful words, we are quite content to humbly acknowledge man has spoilt everything entrusted to him. In like manner, we have a hindering of the full MANIFESTATION of our 'salvation', that wondrous miracle which was entrusted to us. Man HAS spoilt everything, but we are content till we reach the glory to build our faith on (shall I say?) 59 words out of 60, or on 99 out of 100, and to wait until we reach the Lord's presence to know which is the 60th or 100th word. We acknowledge there are certain words, we acknowledge there are two or three verses in the New Testament, as to the authenticity of which there is a doubt, but we acknowledge also that these verses have been tracked down by the number of manuscripts, and we can say where an error has come in, and see how the mistake has been made. If Satan tried to confuse the issue by making someone write down incorrectly, God has given sufficient manuscripts to track down Satan's attack, and also to provide us with a humbling lesson. Alas, men write incorrectly and do everything incorrectly. Beloved friends, you well know that if all present attempted to take down a letter which might be dictated in this room, the manuscript copies would differ.

You know this, it is nothing strange, the difference of manuscript is to be expected. The remarkable thing is that there are such few differences, and God has preserved us many manuscripts to help His people, and to enable us to see the way in which His words were written.

Rather remarkably, too, the very opponents of Scripture give their testimony. The ancient heretics and the ancient infidels dealt in their way with the Scriptures, and, therefore, the opposing books which these wrote show that the Scriptures then existed. Their opposition has been overruled. The wrath of man praises God, and the remainder has been restrained.

It is a delightful evidence of Divine overruling to see that the Jews have handed down the Scripture which convicts them, and Christendom has handed down for example, the parable of the leaven, and other Scriptures which are so definitely against her practices. It is wondrous to notice the Lord's care over the manuscripts on the part of those who could not interpret them, or if they interpreted them, made a mistake as to the meaning. Their very misinterpretations, however, make God's own Truth to stand out the more definitely. I grant there are difficulties, sometimes we do not know how a word is spelled, sometimes we do not know which word is used. These, however, are a call to prayer, a call to humility, a call to gratitude for the Truth handed down - a call to deep prayerful study, a call to compare Scripture with Scripture, and thus there is much fruit as we give thanks in the Name of the Lord Jesus and in the power of the Holy Spirit, for the many blessings which we have received as accompaniments of His marvellous saving grace.

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