

Ephesians

An encyclical letter from the heart of CHRIST
through the heart of Paul to the heart of the Church of all time

by

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CHAPTER ONE

AN APPROACH TO VERSE ONE

THE APOSTLE PAUL says in one of his personal letters to Timothy that all Scripture is inspired of GOD, or God-breathed (II Timothy 3:16). But GOD has breathed into writings of a widely different order. Both in the literary style and in the ethical and spiritual content the books of Scripture present a manifold diversity.

Sacred truth is given to us in a great variety of forms. Running through all these books we have at least four lines of truth:

Prophetical truth
Historical truth
Ethical truth
Doctrinal truth

and all truth

Devotional truth

First of all, then, we have *prophetical* truth; and for the sake of convenience I use the word prophetical in its popular sense as "prediction." And I put this first in order because prophecy in this sense was spoken before a single line of human history was written. It was on one of the earliest days of human history that we hear GOD saying:

"I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

That sentence arches the centuries; in that sentence there is expressed and anticipated the moral struggle of the ages between the children of men and the powers of another sphere, as it found its superlative expression in the person of CHRIST and climaxed in Him. It will be recalled how, on the occasion of the return of the seventy disciples, He said to them, **"I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven"** (Luke 10:18).

We may not be able to indicate any historical event to which CHRIST alludes as the fall of Satan from Heaven, but we understand the moral significance of the statement. Though Satan be as dazzlingly brilliant as lightning, his career is measured and his doom is pronounced. And so we read, "**The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly**" (Romans 16:20).

And thus it was that early sentence of Genesis became indicative of the moral history of the race for all time. And so it has been aptly said that "prophecy is the mold of history." Let us take two or three illustrations of this.

We turn over only a few pages of the Book of Genesis, and in the fifteenth chapter GOD is again speaking in the language of prediction. This time He is addressing Abraham. He is speaking of a struggle which shall ensue between Abram's seed and those who shall oppress them; and He announces the outcome.

And He said unto Abram, "**Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance**" (Genesis 15:13, 14).

Notice five distinct predictions in that statement to Abram:

1. His posterity were to occupy, for a limited and specified time, a land which was not their own.
2. They were to be in a position of subordination to the foreign power.
3. They were to suffer hardship at the hands of these foreigners until a definitely indicated time had run.
4. GOD would visit judgment upon their oppressors.
5. They would be delivered out of their hands in a manner that would bring to them great material wealth.

Every element in this prediction was exactly and literally fulfilled. As the four hundred years drew to a close, GOD threw down the challenge to Pharaoh; and after judgment had been visited upon the oppressors, the hour for deliverance arrived, and Israel was free.

Take another illustration. We turn to the Book of Jeremiah, thirteen hundred years later. The children of Israel were again in a foreign land. Apostasy and idolatry had weakened the nerve of their national life, and they had become not only a subject people, but captives as well. They had been carried to Babylon. But Jeremiah the prophet remained in the land, and he sent messages to his captive countrymen. And in one of his messages he indicates the length of the captivity:

"For thus saith the LORD, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end" (Jeremiah 29:10-11).

What happened? When the seventy years were about to expire, a Persian monarch ascended the throne of world empire and proclaimed the release of captive Israel. Once again prophecy had

been "the mold of history."

I take one more illustration of this phenomenon, and this time I turn to the Gospels. The predictions are being announced by the Lord JESUS Himself. It is an afternoon of the last week of His life, and the disciples are putting questions to Him concerning the future. As He proceeds to answer them, there appears to come up before His consciousness an apocalyptic vision of the centuries of this present age, and His mind lingers upon the fate and hope of the Jewish people, and of the city of Jerusalem, which was so dear to the heart of every Israelite.

"And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled (Luke 21:24).

Forty years after these words were spoken, the three predictions which are expressed came to pass. The closing words contain a prediction implied. Jerusalem will no longer be trodden down of the Gentiles after their times shall have been fulfilled. And may we not say with unhesitating certainty: The hour of their deliverance will presently arrive. Prophecy will become the mold of history.

But in the second place, we have in the Scriptures *historical truth*. Now one of the marks and tests of any religion which claims to be the true religion is in whether it can prove itself to be historical. The religion of revelation is historical; no other religion is. It has worked itself into the fabric of history. The religion of revelation is equally at home in the past, the present, and the future. Its roots are in the past; its mission is in the present; and its hope is in the future, because its life is in GOD.

Judaism was essentially a historical religion. GOD took the seed of Abraham and worked out through the processes of their history the program of redemption. And so Judaism was always looking back into its past and forward into its future with a fervently religious and confident gaze. It was historical, and so GOD was the GOD of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And that was not a notion of their own; it was not a national conceit. GOD had deliberately come into their history, and they knew it. The name which GOD chose as His perpetual name was a historical name.

"And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, the Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name forever, and this is my memorial unto all generations" (Exodus 3:15).

Even their prayers were historical. Turn to the ninth chapter of Nehemiah and listen to one of the Levites as he leads the congregation in prayer. This is how the prayer commences:

"Thou, even thou, art Lord alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth, and all things that are therein, the seas, and all that is therein, and thou preservest them all; and the host of heaven worshippeth thee. Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham; and foundest his heart faithful before thee, and madest a

covenant with him, to give the land of the Canaanites . . . to his seed" (Nehemiah 9:6-8).

The prayer occupies almost an entire chapter of thirty-eight verses. It is a synopsis of their national history.

Turn over to the apostolic Scriptures. The discourses of the apostles were historical, for the apostles were Israelites, and the Gospel was a fulfillment of the promises made to the fathers. Stephen makes his defense; it is a recital of history (Acts 7). Paul preaches at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:14-41); the discourse is historical.

Christianity is a historical faith; it rests back upon historical facts. And so the Gospel is announced in historical terms.

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that CHRIST died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures; and that he was seen . . ." (I Corinthians 15:3-5).

And so history becomes basic to revelation

We know what GOD is by what He is doing, by what He has done. GOD reveals Himself in action, but how unspeakably sacred, how mightily potent, His actions can be.

But in the Scriptures we have not only predictive truth and historical truth, we have also *ethical truth*, because a true religion will regulate the outer conduct of life. And ethical truth rests back upon revelation; it is the corollary of it; it proceeds from it. This confronts us everywhere.

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). That is the ethic.

"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us." That is the word of revelation. **"And we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."** That is the ethic (I John 3:16).

"He which hath called you is holy." That is the word of revelation. **"Be ye holy in all manner of conversation."** That is the ethic (I Peter 1:15).

And so all about the surface of Scripture we find ethical truth.

But in the Scriptures we have not only predictive truth and historical truth and ethical truth; we have also *doctrinal truth*.

Now the content of doctrinal truth was comparatively meager until the advent of CHRIST into the world, for doctrinal truths are the orderly expressions of revelation, and revelation was comparatively meager until He came.

And so it is that doctrinal truth has so large a place in the writings of the apostles, for they were

interpreting to the Church the redemptive acts which had been transacted in the person of CHRIST. There was no fullness of doctrine before He came.

Of the doctrine of GOD we read:

"No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him (John 1:18).

Of the doctrine of The HOLY SPIRIT was not yet given; **"because Jesus was not yet glorified** (John 7:39).

Of the doctrine of Fatherhood:

"He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Of the doctrine of Forgiveness:

"Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins" (Acts 13:38).

Of the doctrine of Reconciliation:

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (II Corinthians 5:19).

Of the doctrine of the future life:

"I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2).

And all Scripture truth, whether it be prophetic or historical or ethical or doctrinal, is also *"devotional truth."*

It is calculated to quicken, nourish, educate, discipline, and chasten the spirit, and to comfort the heart in GOD.

But notice further that there are levels and altitudes in Scripture. Not all Scripture is on the same level, or in the same altitude. And the contrast is not in the sense of contradiction, but of advance.

This may be illustrated by taking the Ten Commandments and putting them side by side with Romans 12. Both of them are ethics, but what a difference in the spiritual elevation and tone of the one and the other! And in remarking the contrast I do not forget the deep spiritual implications of the Mosaic law. Nevertheless the ethical appeal of the apostles is on a different level, and in a different tone.

Perhaps this can be illustrated more clearly and forcibly by taking a single precept which is found in the Decalogue, and which is repeated in the Epistles. **"Thou shalt not steal"** is the language of the Decalogue (Exodus 20:15); **"let him that stole steal no more"** is the language of the Epistle (Ephesians 4:28).

The one, is a mandate; the other is an appeal. How do we account for the difference in the tone? In between the mandate and the appeal there was the perfect exemplification of the ethic in the person of Him who took nothing and gave everything.

I said there are levels and altitudes in Scripture. Let me illustrate this from the historical books. Take the books of the Kings and the four Gospels, and put them side by side. They are each history; they are each inspired.

What constitutes the difference? Is it not the manner and measure of the relationship to CHRIST? In the Books of the Kings we have two parallel lines of history - the history of the Northern Kingdom and the history of the Southern Kingdom. In these books there are lapses, declensions, infidelities; in the four Gospels we have incomparable integrity. The Books of the Kings are largely a presentation of contrasts to CHRIST. In the four Gospels we are standing in His presence and listening to His voice.

Can we reach a higher level than that? Let me quote two verses from the Gospel of John.

"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth; for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak; and he will shew you things to come" (John 16:12, 13).

There is a sense in which revelation is progressive

While it is true that GOD knows the end from the beginning, that all history is to Him an open book, the pages of which He turns over as He will, yet He is working out in these time-ages the plans and purposes of eternity; and He permits us to watch and to share in their unfolding and development. Revelation is not progressive in the sense of an evolution, but rather in the sense of an involution. GOD comes into human life first with a declaration of intention, and then to work out that intention in the processes of history. Revelation is progressive not in the mind of GOD, but in the experience of the race.

Now in the epistles we have that further truth of which CHRIST spoke, and in them we reach the high-water mark of revelation. But even in the epistles there is a progressiveness of revelation.

The Epistle to the Romans appears to end with a hint of the further truth which is to be revealed in the Ephesian letter.

The form of these writings is unique. They represent a form of communication which seems to have been developed in the apostolic age - letter writing to groups, it was a form of address which was suited to the immediate purpose - that of communicating religious instruction to a spiritual democracy. The Epistles were not "oracles delivered to the people"; they were "letters written to the brethren."

To whom was this letter written?

In chapter 1:15 he says, "**I heard of your faith**"; in chapter 4:21 he says, "**If so be that ye have heard him**"; and in chapter 3:2 he says, "**if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward.**"

And then in the Epistle to the Colossians there is mention of a letter sent at the same time, which might be this, and which was addressed to the church at Laodicea.

Now in the year A.D. 140 a man by the name of Marcion made a collection of the writings of the apostle Paul. In that collection he included a book which he designated the Epistle to the Laodiceans. That book was the one which we know as the Ephesian letter. What then is the conclusion which we draw from these facts and circumstances? We know that Tychicus was the bearer of the letter to the Colossians (Colossians 4:7); it would seem just as certain that he took at the same time the "Ephesian" letter (Ephesians 6:21, 22).

This letter appears to have been intended by the Apostle for circulation among the churches of Asia Minor as a circular letter. When Tychicus called at Ephesus, the seaport town of Asia Minor, he may have had a number of copies made for distribution. The original may have been left with the Ephesian church, and it may have thus come to be known as the Ephesian letter.

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