

Scripture

by J.C. Philpot

The gift of Scripture is precious and valuable, and its various forms, such as history, devotional writings, prophecy, poetry, and oratory, convey divine truth and beauty.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Isaiah 55:11, Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12

Topics: "Divine Revelation", "Scripture Appreciation"

Description

J.C. Philpot emphasizes the invaluable gift of the Holy Scriptures, which, though familiar, contain profound truths that should captivate our hearts and minds. He delves into the various forms of divine revelation found in the Bible, such as history, devotional writings, prophecy, poetry, oratory, didactic teachings, epistles, and even a sacred drama like the Song of Solomon, each offering unique beauty and depth. Philpot highlights the richness and variety of God's word, urging listeners to appreciate the Scriptures with fresh eyes and a renewed sense of wonder and reverence.

Transcript

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What a gift to the church of God is the inspired word of truth! Next to the gift of his dear Son and the grace of the Blessed Spirit, may we rank the gift of those "Holy Scriptures which are able to make" the regenerate soul "wise unto salvation, through faith which is in Christ Jesus." But though it is so unspeakably precious to have in our own language at our side, in our hands, and sometimes in our hearts, the inspired word of Him who made heaven and earth, of Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being, of Him who by his Spirit and grace enables us to look up to himself as the God of all our mercies, of all our hopes, and all our comforts, yet from the very commonness of the gift, we are apt much to undervalue it. As light, air, water, or even food, clothing, shelter--those indispensable requisites to the support of natural life--are little prized because of daily, hourly use; so the Scriptures, which contain in them the food of the soul, are less valued than they should be, because they are a book familiar to us from childhood. Much in the Holy Scriptures which would strike our minds with astonishment, were it for the first time read, has become so familiar, from constant repetition, as almost to fall listlessly on the ear. The creation of the world and of our first parents; the fall in paradise; the flood, with the preservation in the Ark; the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; the history of Abraham; the diversified scenes of Israel's sufferings and victories; or, to come to the New Testament, the simple, touching narrative of the life,

sufferings, and death of Jesus, in the gospels--were these beautiful descriptions less familiar from constant repetition, how they would arrest our attention, how they would charm our ears, and seem pregnant with interest in every line! True it is that, then, as now, we should as much need the Blessed Spirit to apply them to our hearts, but we should not read them or hear them read as listlessly as we now too often do.

Have our readers ever considered the wonderful variety to be found in the Scriptures?--we mean the varied form under which God has been pleased to reveal his sacred truth? Let us devote a few minutes to the expansion of this thought, as perhaps it may cast a light on that peculiar mode of instruction which is presented to us in the Song of Solomon.

If it had so pleased him, God might have confined himself to one form of holy instruction, as, say for instance such positive directions as we find issued relative to the tabernacle. (Exod. 25-30.) But as in creation, variety of form, size, color, sheds beauty on all the works of his hands, so in the word of his grace, variety gives new beauties to revelation. Let us consider a few instances of this variety, which may serve more fully to open our meaning.

1. The first and most prominent form is that of history, forming, both in Old Testament and New, a large portion of the sacred volume. All events being under his control and directed to his glory, and some being stamped with more evident marks of his special interposition, God has seen fit to record such as in his unerring wisdom should be for the perpetual instruction and edification of the church. But what remarkable features are stamped on Bible history, viewed as a special form of revelation!

Consider, first, its antiquity: how it stretches back to the beginning of all time; no, we may say, into eternity itself. What should we know of the creation or the fall, but for the Bible? And if the creation of man in his original purity and his fall into sin and death had not been thus divinely revealed, what a mystery, what a perpetual stumbling-block would this life and this world, with all their sins and sorrows, have ever presented!

But besides the antiquity, what a certainty does the historical part of the Bible afford of the circumstances related, and how different in this respect from the fabulous, obscure narratives of heathen historians! What a charming simplicity, too, and tender pathos, combined, where needed, with strength and energy, do we find in the historical pages of holy writ! As an obvious instance, how tender, yet simple and life-like, is the history of Joseph. As a mere record of Israel's preservation, a bare outline of Joseph's history would have been sufficient. But what a loss would those beautiful details have been which have given such life and power to that pathetic narrative! The noble speech of Judah, the yearnings of Joseph's heart, restrained until they broke out into such floods of weeping that "the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard;" the tender pathos of those words, "I am Joseph; is my father yet alive?" in which, laying aside all the dignity of the first prince of Egypt, he gave vent to the pent-up affections of 20 years, with a hundred other traits of divine beauty in that touching narrative--where can we find a parallel in works written by the finger of man? The whole history of David, too, and specially his combat with Goliath, his last interview with Jonathan, his flight from Jerusalem, with his touching self-reproach and submission, his watching at the gate for tidings about Absalom--Absalom the rebel, the incestuous adulterer, yet still Absalom the darling of the old man's heart--with that heart-rending cry, when Cush, not daring to tell the whole, yet told enough to fulfill his worst fears, "O my son Absalom, my son Absalom! would God I had died for you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"--apart from all the divine truths conveyed by this unequalled narrative, who does not feel its consummate tenderness and beauty?

We cannot, from wanting space and other reasons, dwell upon particulars, or in the New Testament we might point out the history of Lazarus with the strongly-contrasted character of the two sisters and the God-Man in the midst, weeping as man, raising the dead as God; the last supper, with the washing of the disciples' feet; the scenes in the garden and at the cross; the walk to Emmaus; the ascension from Mount Olivet, and a thousand other traits in the gospels, as full of tenderness and beauty, apart from their divine character. So, what simple yet noble pictures have we in the Acts of the Apostles! Paul's miraculous conversion; his unparalleled labors and zeal; his boldness when, at the risk of his life, he rushed into the theater at Ephesus; his touching parting at Miletus; (Acts 20;) his noble speeches before Felix and Festus; his voyage and shipwreck--what traits of beauty shine through all his history! As in a noble landscape, or an exquisite painting, or a beautiful piece of music, besides the general effect, a thousand single traits of beauty or harmony start forth to charm the eye or ear, so in the word of God, besides the general sublimity and harmony that are stamped on the whole, innumerable features of beauty leap forth to the observing eye. In creation there is not only beauty, but a prodigality of beauty, from the gleaming stars overhead to the kingfisher's bosom or the butterfly's wing; and thus in the Scriptures there is not merely an exquisite grandeur stamped on the whole, but an overflowing beauty gushing from every page.

2. But history is only one form of divine revelation. There are what we may call devotional writings. The Holy Spirit, not only inspired men of God to breathe forth prayer and praise, not only taught them to sigh and groan, rejoice and sing, but instructed them to commit to writing those breathings of their soul after the living God. As these divine breathings were usually set to music and sung in the tabernacle worship, they were called "Psalms."* What a manual of living experience, what a standing model and exemplar of vital communion with God, what a perpetual stream of consolation and edification to the church of Christ these divine compositions are and ever have been, it is unnecessary for us here to mention. From the lowest depths of trouble and sorrow to the loftiest heights of joy and praise, there is no state or stage, movement or feeling of divine life in the soul, which is not expressed in the simplest and sweetest language in the Psalms. They are thus not only a test and guide of Christian experience, a heavenly prayer-book, a daily devotional companion, a bosom friend in sorrow and joy, a sure chart for the heaven-bound voyager, and an infallible standard of divine teaching, but a treasury of strength and comfort, out of which the Holy Spirit blesses the waiting soul.

* The word "Psalms," which is taken from the Greek, means literally the soundings of the strings of the lyre, and thence the divine songs which were sung to stringed instruments.

3. But there is prophecy also, reaching forth from the first promise given in paradise down to periods still buried in futurity. Here, as in a continually unfolding roll, are written by the finger of God events of the deepest importance, and especially the sufferings and glory of Christ, and, as one with him, the sufferings and glory of the church. Nor are these prophetic strains mere cold predictions, mere dry, formal declarations of future events. Mingled with the strains of the prophetic harp, flow in the full tide of harmony, promises, warnings, threatenings, rebukes, exhortations, all teeming with that peculiar energy and power which stamp the word of God as truly divine.

Poetry, too, and oratory--poetry such as uninspired poet never reached, oratory such as human eloquence never attained to--lend their charms, giving to prophets such as Isaiah language as exalted as their theme. Nor let these be thought out of place. Poetry and oratory, in their purest, highest state, are but the expression of impassioned thought, lofty, burning language being the necessary vehicle of lofty, burning ideas. Thus as the thoughts of God are higher than those of men, the language of God is higher than that of men; and what is called poetry and oratory being but lofty thoughts in lofty words, poetry and oratory are

the necessary vehicles of divine thought. To point out a tenth of these beauties of thought and expression would require pages; but as one instance, take Isaiah 63, and read it as a dialogue, which indeed it is, between Christ and the church. The church seeing in the distance a mighty personage advancing, bursts forth with the inquiry, "Who is this that comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah? this that is glorious in his apparel, traveling in the greatness of his strength?" The Redeemer answers, "I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save." "Why are you red in your apparel?" again inquires the church, "and your garments like him that treads in the winevat?" The Redeemer answers, "I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me; for I have trodden them in mine anger, and trampled them in my fury; and their blood is sprinkled upon my garments, and I have stained all my clothing." What poetry, what oratory, are here; how sublime the thoughts, how noble and impassioned the language! Similar beauties may be found in almost every chapter.

4. But instruction is also conveyed under a more strictly condensed and didactic form, as in the "Proverbs," where the wisest and deepest lessons of moral teaching are couched under short, simple sentences, alike pithy and pointed, and from their concise, antithetical style, easy to be remembered. Happy the man who could direct his moral conduct, we might add, even his habits of life and business, according to the rules laid down in the Proverbs; happier he who can receive the spiritual counsel veiled under these moral rules, and act up to their spirit and divine meaning!

5. Nor are letters--that charming mode of communion between distant friends--wanting as another form of divine instruction. The Epistles, we know, of Paul and other apostles constitute a large portion of the New Testament. How overflowing with holy affection are these letters to churches and individuals; how pregnant with grace and truth; how richly do they unfold the doctrines of the gospel; how copious are they in promise, how comprehensive in precept, how pointed in reproof; how tender to console, how faithful to warn, how impregnated throughout with heavenly savor and dew!

These features are, indeed, so prominent in the Epistles, that it is superfluous to point them out to those who read them with an enlightened eye. But one feature may, perhaps, have escaped the observation of some of our readers, who, dwelling chiefly on single verses, may not have paid much attention to the epistle as a whole; we mean the subtle but strong chain of close argument which distinguishes some of Paul's epistles, especially those two masterpieces, the Epistle to the Romans and that to the Hebrews.

Take, for instance, the eleven first chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. Were we called upon to do so, we believe we could point out a logical series of the subtlest and strongest reasoning in those chapters so powerful and masterly, that hardly a word does not contribute a link to the chain:--were it necessary, we, think we could trace out the deeply important subject which he there handles, that is, the justification of the believer, and show the gradual unfolding of his argument, the way in which he supports it from the Scriptures, the decisive conclusion to which he comes, the objections he anticipates and answers, the consequences he draws, until he winds up the whole with, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

But how many of the Lord's people have read and re-read those eleven chapters, and with profit too, and comfort to their souls, on whom this masterpiece of reasoning, as a complete chain of logical argument, is almost utterly lost. What oratory, too, has he poured forth. Read, in this point of view, the first chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews. With what majestic dignity, even in our translation, which is far inferior to the original, it opens; and how it rises and swells, like a noble organ, until it peals forth that full strain, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"

"(Heb. 1:14.) Look also at Heb. 12:18-24. How beautifully are the two dispensations contrasted! How we seem transported, on the one hand, to the foot of Sinai, until we seem to see the very mountain burning with fire and overshadowing the flames which burst through the "blackness, and darkness, and tempest;" and on the other, carried in spirit to Mount Zion, hovering round which we seem to view the "innumerable company of angels," and on the mount itself, "the general assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven."

Apart from the blessed truth conveyed in these verses, what beautiful imagery, what life-like touches, what breathing eloquence, what sublimity of thought, and fullness yet compression of language, shine through the whole. Again, what a picture of human wickedness does the pen of Paul draw in Rom. 1:20-32. How concise, yet how pregnant the language; how damning the catalogue of crimes; how burning the words that denounce them. What a concentration of thought and expression, the very essence of true oratory, is observable in verses 29-31!

And in that acknowledged masterpiece of eloquence, Rom. 8:28-39, how the language keeps rising in power and grandeur, until death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present and things to come, height, depth, and creation itself, are all challenged to separate the elect from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord!

6. But we are now brought to another form of divine revelation, which we hardly know how to name, lest our meaning be misunderstood, but we may venture to call it a Sacred Drama. By the expression we do not mean anything approaching theatrical representation, but the introduction of distinct people and scenes, and the carrying on of a dialogue, in which the parties express their affections and feelings to each other. Our readers will at once perceive that we mean the Song of Solomon. We do; but not exclusively, for we have it shadowed forth in other parts of Scripture, as Job. 1, 2, and Ps. 24, 45. But it is most fully carried out in the Song of Solomon, which is a celebration of the mutual love and delight in each other of Christ and the Church.

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