

Sabbath School Lesson #7 – Language, Text, and Context – 9-15 May 2020

Christ would have us correctly understand Scriptures that leads us to Him, for only in Him we have righteousness and life. Thus we read: “Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against thee” (Deuteronomy 31:26). To the Jews had been committed the book of the law. It was called “the testimony,” because it was for a witness against them. They were not taught that they could get righteousness out of it, although it was perfect, but the contrary. Because it was so perfect, and they were sinners, it could have nothing but condemnation for them. It was designed only to drive them to Christ, in whom alone they could find the perfect righteousness that the law requires. “The law worketh wrath” (Romans 4:15), and Christ alone saves from wrath. But they misunderstood the law, and so they “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9). They found no righteousness, “because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law” (Romans 9:31-32). Today, we have the law written in the book, even the Bible, and all that is therein is meant to drive us to Christ. “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39). It requires understanding the language, text, and context, so as to rightly divide the word of truth so as to have Christ, who is our life.

The Bible was originally written mainly in the Hebrew and languages. Most of the English versions we have today were translated from those original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

In instances where translating word for word of the original language would not make good sense in the English, translators translated the meaning in the context of the original. Let us consider this example of a literal word translation: “For when God made promise to Abraham, because He could swear by no greater, He sware by Himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee” (Hebrews 6:13-14). The words, “Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee,” are a literal translation of the Hebrew words of the promise, in Genesis 22:17. But everybody who has given any study to language knows that an idiom, that is, a characteristic expression, in one language, does not make good sense if translated word for word into another language. A word for word translation is not an exact rendering. In the Hebrew language, repetition, whether of a sentence or phrase, or a word, or even of a single letter in a word, indicates emphasis, positiveness. For example, in Genesis 2:16 we have the statement, “Thou mayest freely eat,” which is as plain as anything can be; but the word for word rendering of the equally plain expression in the Hebrew, is given in a literal translation, “eating thou dost eat”, which in English does not make good sense. Translators had to translate the meaning to make good rendering of the original. So also in the next verse, where we read, “Thou shalt surely die,” we have in the literal translation, “dying thou dost die.” Thus the expression in Hebrews 6:14, although not making good sense, is the word for word rendering of the Hebrew words conveying the positive assurance, “I will certainly bless thee, and I will surely multiply thee.”

There are also expressions used in the context of what people knew well. We notice an example of this in reference to what our Lord said to Saul in Acts. Saul was unconsciously persecuting the Lord, even so the Lord, without Saul recognising the fact, was patiently giving him instruction all the time. The expression, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 26:14) or in other translations, “It is hard for you to kick against the goads”, was an expression that Saul knew or could understand, for it is an allusion to the way in which oxen were driven, namely, with a sharp goad. A stubborn ox would sometimes kick against the goad, but this only made his case the worse. In the Hebrew language the word for “ox goad” is derived from a word meaning “to teach.” It was with thorns of the desert that Gideon “taught the men of Succoth” (Judges 8:16). It was with a sharp goad that the oxen were reminded of their duty, and taught the way they should go. Even so by the sharp conviction of His own Spirit, the Lord was teaching Saul the right way to go, while Saul was stubbornly resisting. For those who are not familiar with Ox and goads, but with cattle, the International Standard Version says, “It is hurting you to keep on kicking against the cattle prods.”

We turn to consider that some expressions may have both literal and spiritual application. For example, Paul says, “I die daily” (1 Corinthians 15:31). Paul was primarily exposed to

literal dangers that could cause him death, as the verse that follows seem to confirm so, but also he warred with the dangers from within his own body. “The life of the apostle Paul was a constant conflict with self. He said, ‘I die daily.’ 1 Corinthians 15:31. His will and his desires every day conflicted with duty and the will of God. Instead of following inclination, he did God’s will, however crucifying to his nature” {MH 452.4}. “At the close of his life of conflict, looking back over its struggles and triumphs, he could say, ‘I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.’ 2 Timothy 4:7, 8” {MH 453.1}. “The Christian life is a battle and a march. In this warfare there is no release; the effort must be continuous and persevering. It is by unceasing endeavor that we maintain the victory over the temptations of Satan. Christian integrity must be sought with resistless energy and maintained with a resolute fixedness of purpose” {MH 453.2}. Like Paul, we are exposed to literal dangers and spiritual dangers, and we do well to “die daily.”

Above all, we should always apply Bible language and expression to ourselves in order to benefit in feeding on the Word of God. In ordinary eating of literal food, whatever a man eats that is not real food, is not only useless to him, but is a positive injury, since it taxes the digestive organs without adding any strength. Therefore anything that one eats that is not or cannot be assimilated, and does not go to build up the system, is only a damage. Even so it is with our reading. If we read that which is not useful, – that which does not tend to build us up, and make us stronger mentally and spiritually, – it is only an injury to us. It is even worse than eating that which is not good food. It is both a waste of time and a wasting away of the faculties. It is much the same if we read even good matter, and do not think as we read. To be sure we are not having our minds poisoned, as when worthless trash is read, but the mental powers are not strengthened by such reading, but vitiated instead. Such a manner of reading weakens the memory, and is little better than dreaming. In short, if we do not get positive nourishment by what we read, our reading is, to say the least, of no benefit to us.

Apply this now to our reading of the Bible. If we read it simply as a story book, we get no real benefit, except that we are kept from reading, something that is not good. If when we read the promises, or the record of victories which were gained through those promises, we see nothing more than the bare fact that certain men had certain experiences, then our reading is like swallowing lumps of food that is in itself good, but which is not digested nor assimilated. The Bible is the language of the Spirit of God spoken through men. Consequently it is not the language simply of the men who perused it. The Spirit of God, who knows the human heart and its needs, as well as the divine gifts, has put language into the mouths of certain men, which may be used by all. So, and for example, when we read the words of David, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, who forgiveth all thine iniquities” (Psalm 103:1-3), we are to appropriate that language as our own. If we do so, we shall understand the Scriptures, and shall be benefited by them. But if we are content to read it simply as David’s experience, it is the same to us as though it had not been written in the Bible.

Let us learn to read the Scriptures in this way, and the Bible will soon be a new book to us. The reading of it will be a delight. When we read reproofs and warnings, we shall know that they mean us personally; and when we read the promises which always accompany reproofs, we shall rejoice in them as much as though we were addressed by name. When we read the statement of experience, we shall adopt it as our own, and realize all the benefit of it. Until we learn to read the Bible in this way, we cannot be said to really believe it. We may indeed believe that God spoke to and blessed David and Paul; but if we do not make that language and blessing our own, we do not really believe the word, for it is addressed to us. If you wish to know if you really believe the whole Bible, you may test yourselves by this text: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). If you read this merely as Paul’s experience, then you have not learned to believe the Bible. But if in reading it you can speak that word “I” as meaning yourself, and can repeat the text intelligently as the language of your own heart, as the Spirit of God meant you should, then you really believe not that verse alone, but the whole Bible, and the joy of God’s salvation is yours, for Christ will indeed be your life.