

God's Plan of the Ages

***“Study to shew
thyself approved
unto God, a
workman that
needeth not to be
ashamed, rightly
dividing the
word of truth.”
—II Timothy 2:15***

IN HIS SECOND LETTER

to Timothy, the Apostle Paul reveals that there were some in his day who taught that “the resurrection is past already.” (II Tim. 2:18) It is evidently in view of this false teaching that Paul admonished Timothy three

verses earlier to “rightly divide the word of truth”—that is, “handle aright, to teach the truth directly and correctly.” (*Thayer's Greek Definitions*) The lesson is obvious. The resurrection of the dead is one of the most prominent teachings of the Bible. It is so important in the plan of God that Paul himself wrote, that if there is no resurrection of the dead, “Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished.” (I Cor. 15:16-19) The erroneous view mentioned by Paul to Timothy was not that there was no resurrection of the dead, but that the promised resurrection was “past already.”

This helps us to understand what Paul meant by rightly dividing the word of truth, which was that we should learn to place the various promises of God, and the prophecies of the Bible, in their proper place relative to the time sequences in the divine arrangement. The Bible emphatically teaches the resurrection of all the dead, “the just and unjust.” (Acts 24:15) However, it does not state that the resurrection was to take place at the time of the Early Church. The proper time for the general resurrection of the dead is still future.

THE “DUE TIME”

The Bible states, “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven.” (Eccles. 3:1) God has a “due time” for every feature of his plan of salvation. There was a due time for Christ to come and to die for the sin-cursed world, and there is a due time when the knowledge of this provision of divine love will be “testified” to all. (Rom. 5:6; I Tim. 2:5,6) It is only as we recognize this element in the plan of God that we are able to discover the marvelous harmony of his Word.

A simple illustration of this would be an architect’s plans and specifications for a three-story building. While there would be some similarity between the plans and specifications for the various floors, in many respects they would differ. Should one attempt to apply the specifications for the third floor in place of those for the first floor, they would certainly be contradictory.

The divisions in the plan of God, of course, are not from the standpoint of height, as in a building,

but in terms of purpose and time. As to time, we find that there are three major divisions in the plan of God. In a very general way these might be designated as past, present, and future. More specifically, however, the Bible refers to these three time divisions as “the world that then was,” the “present evil world,” and the “world to come.” —II Pet. 3:6; Gal. 1:4; Heb. 2:5

The world that “then was” came to an end at the time of the Flood. This was the antediluvian world, which began with the creation of Adam. The “present evil world” began after the Flood, and continues to the completion of the church and the establishment of Christ’s kingdom upon the earth. The “world to come” subsequently begins and continues into the endless ages of eternity, the first thousand years being the period of Christ’s reign.—Rev. 20:4,6

In the third chapter of Peter’s second epistle, he describes the main component elements of these three worlds by the symbolic terms “heavens” and “earth,” meaning the spiritual, and material—or earthly—aspects of these worlds, or social orders. (II Pet. 3:7) In “rightly dividing” God’s Word, it is also essential to determine when literal language is used, and when the Lord is speaking to us in symbolic language. This can be determined by applying the known facts concerning the divine purpose in the creation of man. The Scriptures reveal clearly that it was God’s purpose that the earth should be man’s eternal home. We have the assurance that “the earth abideth for ever,” and that God created it “not in vain, he formed it to be inhabited.”—Eccles. 1:4; Isa. 45:18

SYMBOLIC HEAVENS AND EARTH

This means that prophecies which refer to the passing away of the “heavens” and the “earth” must of necessity be symbolic. By way of example, the literal planet Earth itself did not perish at the time of the Flood, although Peter declares that the heavens and the earth, or world, of that time did perish. (II Pet. 3:5,6) By the same token, when we read that the heavens and the earth “which are now” will also be destroyed, we know that the literal Earth will remain. (vs. 7) It is the symbolic earth, or present world order, that is “removed,” to be replaced by a new earthly order in which God’s name will ultimately be exalted, when he says to the raging nations, “Be still, and know that I am God: ... I will be exalted in the earth.”—Ps. 46:2,10

Thus, the Apostle Peter assures us that there will be a “new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:13) This will not be a new sun, moon, and stars, or a new planet Earth, but a new and righteous social order. It will be the kingdom of Christ—that divine government which will cause God’s will to be done in earth as it is now done in heaven. (Matt. 6:10) In that new “world to come” there will be peace, joy, health and everlasting life for all who obey the laws of Christ’s kingdom.—Rev. 21:3-7

In our study of the Bible, it is essential to discern which texts, or portions thereof, apply to the first world, which to the present world, and which to the “new heavens” and “new earth” of the coming Messianic kingdom. We read, for example, God’s instructions to Noah concerning the building of an ark. We know those instructions applied exclusively

to the first world, and particularly to Noah. This illustration highlights the fact that certain instructions and promises which apply to one period in the plan of God might not necessarily apply to another.

So far as general conditions in the present evil world are concerned, Malachi says, "Now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered." (Mal. 3:15) This harmonizes with what we know to be true in the present experience of the human race. However, the Bible also tells us that in "his days" the righteous shall "flourish." (Ps. 72:7) We know that this is not true at the present time. Therefore, in rightly interpreting the Scriptures, we apply this text to the third world, to the time when Christ's righteous kingdom will be in operation.

Jesus referred to Satan, the Devil, as the "prince of this world." (John 14:30) Paul speaks of him as the "god of this world," and explains that he blinds the minds of those who "believe not." (II Cor. 4:4) Jesus will be the king, the ruler, in the righteous world of tomorrow. This, in fact, is what guarantees that it will be a righteous world. Knowing this, we properly apply all the texts of the Bible which refer to a time when righteousness will flourish and be triumphant, to the "world to come."

ADDITIONAL TIME DIVISIONS

The Bible indicates that in this present evil world there are additional time divisions in the plan of God. These we often speak of as "ages." The first age, or era, following the Flood we refer to as the age of the Patriarchs, because it was during this

time that God dealt exclusively with the patriarchs, or “fathers”—Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Acts 3:13; 7:32) To these God made various promises, the principal one being to Abraham, which was the wonderful assurance that through his “seed,” or offspring, all the families of the earth would be blessed.—Gen. 12:1-3; 22:18

This promise indicated God’s interest in all the people, yet during that age he did little to show his favor to any other than the patriarchs. For example, he allowed the wicked people of Sodom and Gomorrah to continue in their sin until it came to the full; then he destroyed them. (Gen. 19:23-25) Centuries later Jesus explained that if the same efforts had been made in Sodom and Gomorrah as he had made in Israel, they would have repented and not been destroyed. He said, also, that it would be “more tolerable” for Sodom and Gomorrah in the “day of judgment” than for the Israelites who rejected and persecuted him.—Matt. 10:15; 11:21,23

These statements reveal that God’s due time for extending his favor to the Sodomites is still future, and that it will be during the “day of judgment.” Paul told the Athenians that God “hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness.” (Acts 17:31) This again emphasizes the due time element in God’s plan. The judgment day, when God will deal with and offer his blessings and the opportunity for life to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, is an “appointed” day in God’s plan, and we may be sure that he will keep this, as well as all of his divine appointments and purposes.

THE JEWISH AGE

The age of the Patriarchs ended with the death of Jacob. On his deathbed, Jacob gathered his twelve sons around him and pronounced blessings upon each one. They were the nucleus of the nation of Israel. Thus, from the death of Jacob to the First Advent of Christ, God's dealings were almost exclusively with this nation. He visited and delivered the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. Through Moses, he gave them his Law. He sent his prophets to them. Through the Prophet Amos the Lord said to Israel, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth."—Amos 3:2

Jesus came in the closing years of the Jewish Age, and he respected his Heavenly Father's special dealings with Israel and the Jewish people. When sending his disciples into the ministry he said to them, "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." (Matt. 10:5,6) This was no indication that Jesus did not love the Gentiles, nor did it mean that God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth had been forgotten. It was merely that the due time had not yet arrived for divine favor to be extended to other than this one nation.

After his resurrection, Jesus removed this restriction, saying to his disciples just before he left them, "Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth." (Acts 1:8) This broadening of the ministry of Christ represented the beginning of another age in the plan of God—the Gospel Age—which we might also call

the Christian age. During the Jewish Age God dealt primarily with a single nation—Israel. During the Gospel Age he has carried on his work through the proclamation of the “gospel of the kingdom” to all nations, and he has accepted and blessed as his people all those who have responded to the message of Christ, regardless of their race or nationality.—Matt. 24:14; Gal. 3:26-29

AGES OF PREPARATION

One thing, however, has been common to both the Jewish and Gospel Ages. In both of them the work of the Lord has primarily been to prepare a people through whom the promise made to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth would be fulfilled. The natural descendants of Abraham were given the first opportunity to become the “seed” of blessing. (Gen. 22:18) It was offered to them on a national basis, but was dependent upon obedience to God’s law. Through Moses, God said to this nation, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.”—Exod. 19:5,6

The priestly family within Israel served the nation as God’s representatives in extending his blessings to the Israelites. God’s promise that upon the condition of faithfulness the whole nation would be a “kingdom of priests” indicates that the nation could have become the means of blessing, the natural “seed” through which his promised blessing to all the families of the earth would come to pass in due time.

The nation of Israel struggled mightily for many centuries to be faithful to their covenant; and eventually, due to their unfaithfulness, there began a long period in which they were in bondage to Gentile kingdoms. Israel's climactic test of worthiness for this high position in the plan of God came when Jesus presented himself to them as their Messiah at his First Advent. As a nation, however, the Israelites rejected him. The Apostle John wrote, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not." (John 1:11) This rejection of Jesus confirmed their unworthiness, as a nation, to be a kingdom of priests.

From that time forward the selection of the seed of Abraham, the future means of God's blessings to the world, has been conducted on an individual basis. The first opportunity for individuals to qualify for this high honor was offered to the Israelites. John explains that while the nation rejected Jesus, "As many as received him [individually], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name."—vs. 12

However, the number of individual Israelites who accepted Jesus was too small to make up God's foreordained number of the "seed" class. Hence, as we have seen, soon after Pentecost the Gospel invitation began to be extended to the people of other nations. This was in keeping with Jesus' final instruction to his disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel.—Matt. 28:19

GENTILES INVITED

It was not the divine intention, however, that the witness of the Gospel among all nations would convert the world to Christ during the present

Gospel Age. God's purpose in the work of this age, which began at Pentecost, is clearly expressed in Acts 15:14, where we read that "God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name." This "people for his name" are called and prepared to be joint-heirs with Jesus, who is the Head of the promised "seed" class.—Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:8,16,27-29

The faithful members of this class are shown to be with the "Lamb," Jesus, on Mount Zion. They are said to have the Lamb's "name and his Father's name written on their foreheads." (Rev. 14:1, *Revised Standard Version*) The first of these to be called were the individual Jews who accepted Jesus, and to whom he gave "power to become the sons of God." The remaining number are called out from the Gentile world. These also are taken into the divine family, the "Father's name" being written in their foreheads.

The call and preparation of this "little flock," through the medium of the Gospel, has been the principal work of God in the earth throughout the present age, and will soon be completed. (Luke 12:32) It is after this Gospel Age call of a "people for his name," quoted earlier from Acts 15:14, is concluded, that the work of God will then be extended to embrace all mankind. Hence, the account in Acts 15 continues: "After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things."—vss. 16,17

Through David, and other kings of Israel, God ruled his ancient people. But that arrangement ceased with the overthrow of their last king, Zedekiah. The “crown” and the “diadem,” the right to rule, were then removed, and the Prophet Ezekiel stated, “It shall be no more, until he come whose right it is.” (Ezek. 21:25-27) Jesus is the one “whose right it is,” and it is at his promised return and subsequent presence that he establishes his Father’s kingdom. Concerning this we read, “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.”—Isa. 9:7

In this reestablished “kingdom” of the greater David, divine rulership will not be limited to the one nation of Israel, but will embrace all nations. We recall the foregoing words, “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.” With the inauguration of this kingdom under the righteous rule of Christ Jesus and those called from Jews and Gentiles to be a people for his name, the present age will close and the first age of the “world to come” will begin. The Scriptures indicate that it is a thousand years in length, hence it is often referred to as the Millennial Age. (Rev. 20:1-4,6) It is also sometimes referred to as the Messianic Age, or Kingdom Age.

It will be during the Millennial Age that the “residue,” or remainder, of mankind will have an opportunity to “seek after the Lord,” and this will include “all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called.” (Acts 15:17) The Gospel has been widely

witnessed to the Gentile world during the present age, but only a small number have responded to its call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. However, those who have not responded to the Lord's call during this age will still have an opportunity to seek after him.

This means that the Gentiles, as well as the Jews, who throughout the age did not respond to the Gospel call of self-sacrifice will need to be raised from the dead if they are to have an opportunity to seek after the Lord during the Millennial Age. This is exactly what the Bible teaches. Not only will the whole world then be enlightened with a knowledge of the glory of God, but it will also be that glorious age in the plan of God when sickness and death will be destroyed, and when the dead will be raised and given an opportunity to enjoy the blessings of the kingdom.

We note these clear statements of the Bible to the effect that in God's coming kingdom all who have died will be awakened from the sleep of death. "The hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth." "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." (John 5:28,29; I Cor. 15:21,22) Upon being awakened from death, all mankind will be given the opportunity through the educational process of the kingdom to gain everlasting life by developing the qualities of a Christlike character.

BLESSINGS OF THE KINGDOM

During the Messianic kingdom, Satan will be bound. No longer will he go about as a "roaring lion"

seeking whom he may devour. (Rev. 20:1-3; I Pet. 5:8) “No lion shall be there,” Isaiah assures us, “nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there: And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion [where the Christ class are enthroned to administer blessings of life] with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”—Isa. 35:9,10

The “ransomed of the LORD shall return,” Isaiah says. Jesus gave himself a “ransom for all,” Paul explains, and this glorious fact is to be “testified” to all “in due time.” (I Tim. 2:3-6) The ransomed billions of the human race will “return” from death that they may be made acquainted with the loving provision of everlasting life which has been made for them through the redemptive work of Christ. The “due time” for this in God’s plan will be during the Millennial Age.

Let us, then, rejoice at the prospect of the soon establishment of God’s kingdom, under the rulership of Christ, and the glorious consummation of the divine purpose and plan of the ages for mankind. “In this mountain [kingdom] shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath

spoken it. And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”—Isa. 25:6-9

