

The Bible Versus the Traditions of Men

The following article is taken from portions of a public lecture given sixty-four years ago, in 1958, at Indiana University by the late W. Norman Woodworth, editor of The Dawn magazine from the year 1932 until his death in 1975.

The views presented more than six decades ago, we hold as true today; namely, that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, revealing his plan and eternal purpose for the blessing of mankind.

When rightly understood, and human traditions removed, the testimony of the Scriptures becomes harmonious, and criticisms of it unfounded.

BILLIONS OF PEOPLE in the world today profess to accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God. It speaks with relative degrees of authority to the members of thousands of religious denominations. Without doubt it is to be found in the homes of more people than any other book, and at least portions of it have been translated into practically every language of the earth.

The Bible also has more enemies than any other book. Throughout many centuries of the Christian era, devious attempts were made to blot it out of existence. For hundreds of years, it was kept buried in dead languages. To own and read the Bible was a crime which led to persecution, torture, and often death.

As the increasing light of a better day began to dispel some of the superstitions of the Dark Ages, the Bible came under attack by so-called “higher critics” and evolutionists. Its historical narratives were branded as merely allegorical, and its people, it was claimed, were only myths which flitted across the over-stimulated imaginations of its naive and irresponsible writers.

However, the Bible lives on, and today it still enjoys the greatest circulation of any book in the world—and well it might! The efforts made during the Dark Ages to keep it from the people failed. The claims of the higher critics that its records are unreliable have been proven false by the archeologists who have discovered undeniable evidence that the various places and prominent people of the Bible actually existed. Moreover, the Bible is the only book in the world today which furnishes a satisfactory explanation of the present distress of nations, and what the certain outcome will be.

The Bible is also the only book in the world which presents a logical, scientifically correct account of creation. It explains how the first humans came into existence and what the final destiny of man will be. The directness and simplicity with which the opening chapters of the Bible tell the story of man’s creation and listing the names

and ages of the descendants of the first human pair for a period of more than sixteen hundred years, stamps it as being authentic, and just what it claims to be; namely, the inspired Word of God. How else could such detailed information concerning a period predating the most ancient of human records be chronicled?

THE DIVINE PLAN

The reasonableness and harmony of the Bible come more brilliantly to light, however, when we consult its testimony concerning the divine purpose in the creation of man. In Genesis 1:26,27 we are informed that God created man in his own image, commanding him to multiply and fill the earth, and to have dominion over the earth. From this we learn that God's design for man was that he should live on the earth and have dominion over all the lower forms of the earthly creation.

Many long centuries after this statement was made concerning God's purpose in creating man, the Prophet David wrote, "What is man, that thou [Jehovah] art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet."—Ps. 8:4-6

In Hebrews 2:6-8, the Apostle Paul quotes this statement of the eighth Psalm, confirming the Genesis account of creation, in which we are told that God created man to live on, and to have dominion over, the earth. Then Paul adds a significant observation. He says, "But now we see not yet all things

put under him.” In other words, as Paul observes, the original design of God in the creation of man has not yet been realized.

Continuing, Paul indicates why: “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” (vs. 9) Human traditions which have come down to us from past centuries assert that Jesus came to suffer and die in order to afford believing individuals of the human race an opportunity to live in heaven for all eternity, and to escape eternal torment.

However, Paul does not agree with this tradition. His explanation is that in the coming and death of Jesus we see evidence that the original design of God concerning man is yet to become a reality. Why, though, should it be necessary for Jesus to die in order for the divine purpose with respect to man to be accomplished?

The Book of Genesis furnishes the answer to this question. When man was created, he was placed under divine law and warned that disobedience would result in death: “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” (Gen. 2:17) The record is that man did disobey his Creator’s law, and human experience confirms the reality of the foretold penalty of death which has been carried out ever since. Each generation of the human race has, without exception, gone down into the great prison-house of death. Man lost the privilege of living, and with this he also lost his dominion over the earth.

The Bible, however, reveals that God has a plan for the recovery of humanity from death. That plan

is centered in Jesus, the Redeemer and Savior of the world. Throughout the Old Testament we find many promises of God that he would send a redeemer and a savior; and that this great One of promise would, in an age set aside by the Creator, restore fallen and dying man to life on the earth. The Apostle Peter referred to the combined testimony of the prophets concerning this as meaning that there would be “times of restitution of all things.”—Acts 3:20,21

When Jesus was born the angel testified, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10) Thus Paul, in quoting the words of the Prophet David, asserting that man was created to have dominion over the earth, simply explained that the coming and death of Jesus was to the end that this original purpose of God was yet to be accomplished, and that the divine plan for its accomplishment had already been set in motion. Jesus, the Redeemer and Savior, had come for this purpose.

TRADITIONS BECLOUD

God’s plan for the restoration of man to his lost earthly home and dominion has long been hidden by the influence of human traditions which, in large measure, have been inspired by Satan, the great deceiver. His deceptions began in the Garden of Eden. While God had said that death would be the penalty for sin, Satan said, speaking through the serpent, “Ye shall not surely die.”—Gen. 3:4

This lie of Satan has formed the basis of many erroneous human traditions. In essence, it denies

the reality of death. It has made its way into nearly all the non-Christian religions of the world. Among professed Christians, Satan's original lie has also found expression in the claim that man has an immortal soul, so, in reality, he does not die. The Scriptures, however, clearly state, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die."—Ezek. 18:4

This human tradition that man's soul is immortal left no place for the teachings of the Bible pertaining to redemption from death through a Redeemer and a resurrection of the dead. Since, according to this tradition, man could not die, he must go somewhere when he seems to die. Believers, it was claimed, went to heaven; unbelievers to a place of torment, which would be either temporary or eternal, depending on the viewpoint of each individual denomination. Obviously, with misleading traditions of this sort beclouding the mind, one would be hindered from seeing the beauty and simplicity of God's plan of recovery for the human race, and the opportunity which would be given for all to live on the earth as restored human beings forever.

THE HEAVENLY HOPE

To be sure, support is found in the Scriptures for the claim of a heavenly hope. The Bible speaks of a heavenly home for the followers of Jesus. "Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling," wrote Paul. (Heb. 3:1) Likewise, Peter wrote of an "inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you."—I Pet. 1:4

The Bible reveals, however, that it is only the faithful followers of Jesus, a "little flock," who will receive a heavenly reward. (Luke 12:32) This hope

is not to be thought of as an escape from traditional eternal torture, but that these faithful ones may be associated with Jesus in the glorious kingdom work of restoring mankind in general to perfect human life on the earth. The promise to these is that if they suffer and die with Jesus, they will live and reign with him. (II Tim. 2:12) Thus seen, there is a genuine purpose in the exaltation of true Christians to be with Jesus. These receive immortality in the resurrection, hence the use of the word “immortality” in the Bible. Man is not inherently immortal. Satan’s assertion that there is no death is a lie, and as Jesus said concerning him, “He is a liar, and the father of it.”—John 8:44

With the “heaven and hell” traditions blinding students of the Bible to God’s purpose that man was intended to live on the earth forever, there seemed no reason why the earth should continue to exist. This led to another false claim—namely, that with the return of Christ the earth would be destroyed by fire. This erroneous “end of the world” tradition beclouded still further the glorious truth concerning the times of restitution of all things. The Bible tells us, however, that “the earth abideth for ever,” and that God “created it not in vain,” but “formed it to be inhabited.”—Eccles. 1:4; Isa. 45:18

The Bible does speak of the end of the world, but the reference is not to the literal earth, but to a selfish, sinful social order—Satan’s world. The various upheavals of human society which bring about the destruction of the present world are symbolized in the prophecies by storms, earthquakes, winds, and fire. In an effort to prove the

traditional end of the world, these symbols have been interpreted literally. For example, the Apostle Peter wrote concerning this time that the earth would melt and its works be burned up, but he then follows with the promise of a “new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness.” (II Pet. 3:10,13) The “new earth” in which righteousness will reign will be a new righteous order, under the leadership of Christ, to be established on planet Earth, replacing Satan’s evil world of sin and death.

When we set aside human traditions and accept the testimony of the Bible, we see the true end of the world is something we can anticipate with joy. It will mean the end of the reign of sin and death, and the establishment of the long-promised kingdom of Christ. When properly understood, we can see that the prophecies of the Bible pertaining to the end of Satan’s world are already in process of fulfillment. This is the true explanation of present world events. Man is failing to establish peace and goodwill throughout the earth because the time is near for Christ to take over Satan’s house and assume the rulership of the world. (Mark 3:27; Rev. 11:17,18) We are already in this period of great trouble and turmoil that immediately precedes the establishment of his kingdom.—Dan. 12:1; Matt. 24:21; Luke 21:25,26

THE JUDGMENT DAY TRADITION

The Bible speaks of a future day of judgment, but the true nature and purpose of this feature of the plan of God has also been obscured by human creeds. If, as tradition mistakenly holds, the righteous go to heaven when they die, and the wicked

to a place of torment, with the eternal destiny of both classes fixed at death, there would be no valid need for a future day of judgment.

The conclusion drawn by many throughout the centuries has been that the day of judgment spoken of in the Bible is to be twenty-four hours in length. This, another tradition, claims that the righteous are to be brought out of heaven and the wicked from torment, have their virtues and their sins rehearsed, and then be returned to their respective places. Just how so many billions could be brought before the judgment throne in twenty-four hours seems to be quite inexplicable.

How beautiful the teaching of the Bible on this subject is seen to be when human tradition is set aside! In the beginning Adam was on trial—a period of probation which ended in the sentence of death being pronounced upon him. Through the redemptive work of Jesus, Adam and his race are released from that original sentence. During a future judgment day, which will last for a thousand years, each will individually be placed on probation and given the opportunity of accepting the provision of life through Christ by obeying the laws of the kingdom then in force. All who comply with these terms, will live forever.—Acts 17:31; Isa. 26:9; Ps. 96:12,13; II Pet. 3:8-13

The Apostle Peter wrote, “The time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?” (I Pet. 4:17,18) From this statement it is clear that the present age is the judgment day

for the followers of Jesus. Those who have been enlightened with the truth of God's Word, and have dedicated themselves to do his will, following in the footsteps of Jesus, are now on trial for life. For any of these to become fully and willfully disobedient to the gospel would lead to the loss of eternal life.

The tests of the Christian's judgment day are severe. The way is difficult and narrow. (Matt. 7:14; 16:24; I Pet. 1:17) Thus Peter asks, "If the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" He does not reply to this question, but the testimony of the Scriptures is that those who do not now dedicate themselves to do God's will, will appear for trial in the future judgment day of the world, in which they will be judged under the righteous order of that day, not under today's general conditions of sin, selfishness, suffering and death.

In mankind's future judgment day, the knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth "as the waters cover the sea." (Isa. 11:9) Satan, the great deceiver of mankind, will then be bound. (Rev. 20:1-3) Then the books of divine revelation will be opened, in order that the dead, awakened from death, might know the will of God for them. Those who then bring their lives into harmony with the things written in the books will have their names enrolled in "the book of life," and if they continue faithful, will live forever, as Adam would have done had he successfully passed the test of obedience which was placed upon him.—Rev. 20:12; John 5:28,29, *Young's Literal Translation*

While the tests upon the footstep followers of Jesus during the present time of judgment are more severe than those that will be exacted upon the

world in general in the future judgment day, the reward for faithfulness is correspondingly greater. The disciples of Christ who prove faithful even unto death will be rewarded with immortality, the divine nature. They will live and reign with Christ, and will participate with him in the future work of judging the world.—Rom. 2:7; I Cor. 15:53; II Pet. 1:4; Rev. 20:6; I Cor. 6:2

On the other hand, mankind in general who pass the tests of the future time of judgment will be restored to human perfection and enjoy the beauties and blessings of a perfected earth forever. The dominion over the earth, which was forfeited through disobedience, will be restored to them. Thus, we can understand why Jesus, when providing his model prayer to the disciples, instructed them to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.” (Matt 6:10) Indeed, it is the purpose of God’s coming kingdom that his will be done “in earth,” just as it is done in heaven. What a glorious prospect for mankind’s future!

The Apostle Paul will not then need to write, “Now we see not yet all things” put under man. (Heb. 2:8) Then he will be able to write not only that we see Jesus as the Redeemer and Savior of the world, but also as the great King and Judge. Moreover, he will be the “Everlasting Father” who, through the agencies of the kingdom, has brought eternal life to all the willing and obedient of mankind. (Isa. 9:6,7) The human race, restored to divine favor, will then return to fellowship with their great Creator, Jehovah God. “He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”—Rev. 21:3 ■