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UNBELIEF and understanding prophecy

"Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself," Luke 24:25-27.

I was speaking with a friend the other day about the whole business of prophecy and the opposition mounted against the position held by those of us who simply believe, quite literally, what the Bible teaches about the last days and the return of Christ. In our discussion, I referred to the scene on the "Road to Emmaus" when the two despondent disciples were confronted by the Lord Jesus. As we talked it occurred to me that the Saviour put His finger on the cause of the difficulties the disciples were having with the events surrounding the Saviour's death and resurrection. He said to them : "O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken."

The arrest and trial of Christ, His rejection and sufferings at the hands of both the Jewish and Roman leaders, His death at Calvary and then His resurrection after three days, had caused profound confusion which was reflected upon their 'sad and gloomy countenance', Luke 24:17. The disciples' response to the 'stranger's' question, "What manner of communications are these that ye have one to another, as ye walk, and are sad?" indicated that they were disappointed, verse 21, and 'astonished ' or amazed, verse 22, at the aforementioned events.

Rebuke

The explanation by the disciples of their sadness brought a sharp rebuke from the Saviour. In looking at the scene afresh I see that there was no consoling of the two disciples or any expressions of 'sympathetic understanding of their difficulties' but rather a very stern rebuke!

They were 'fools' because they did not 'believe all that the prophets have spoken.'

There were no words designed to ameliorate their fault or express the notion that their misunderstanding and confusion could be excused, because the subject matter they were faced with was very difficult. No! The Saviour pointedly called them 'fools' for not simply believing the words of the prophets. Strange to relate, in the Greek language there is very little difference between being "wise" and being a "fool"! It is merely a matter of a single letter. That in itself is worth considering by those who are so casual in their reading of God's Prophetic Word. A single letter can make a great difference.

One commentator says of the Saviour's words to the disciples: "The word fool sometimes is a term of reproach denoting wickedness. In this sense we are forbidden to employ it in addressing another, Matthew 5:22. That, however, is a different word in the Greek from the one which occurs here. The one there used implies contempt, but the one employed in this place denotes weakness or dullness. He reproached them for not seeing what He had himself so clearly predicted, and what had been foretold by the prophets. The word used in the original does not imply as much reproach as the word fool does among us. It was not an expression of contempt; it was an expression denoting merely that they were thoughtless, and that they did not properly attend to the evidence that He must die and rise again.

'Slow of heart to believe.' Not quick to perceive. Dull of learning. They had suffered their previous opinions and prejudices to prevent their seeing the evidence that He must die and rise from the dead."

Unbelief manifested earlier

Now the spirit of the two on the road to Emmaus was evident some time earlier in the response of the disciples to the Saviour's clear teaching as to what awaited Him at Jerusalem. "From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. Then Peter took him, and



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began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men," Matthew 16:21-23.

Peter's response, 'Be it far from thee', which was, I am sure, the view of all the disciples, can be rendered: 'Lord, spare thyself.' His further response, 'Lord: this shall not be unto thee' means that Peter was saying that such things could not possibly happen to Him! When Peter 'rebuked' the Saviour he was strongly admonishing Him against such an idea as allowing the events He had just disclosed, to happen to Him at Jerusalem.

Put simply, Peter did NOT BELIEVE THE SAVIOUR'S WORDS. What He said just couldn't be true and must not be entertained as true!

Long held views

The reason for that was that the widespread notion about the Messiah's coming, long embraced by the Jews and taught by their leaders, was of a triumphant King coming and setting up His dominion. They had no place in their scheme of things for a rejected, suffering, crucified Messiah.

Therefore, their preconceived notions caused them to reject what the One they had already declared was their Messiah (verse 16), was here teaching them was true and would happen to Him!

Preconceived notions were triumphing over the Words of God!

Later

Some time later, the Saviour returns to this subject. "And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: and they shall kill him, and the third day he shall be raised again. And they were exceeding sorry," Matthew 17:22-23. Note the response. It was not one of submissive faith in the sovereignty of God and the authority of His Word. No! It was one of 'sorrow'! What the Saviour was saying was quite contrary to their expectations and cast them into despair.

In Matthew 20:17-23, the Saviour once more returns to this topic.

"And Jesus going up to Jerusalem took the twelve disciples apart in the way, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man shall be betrayed unto the chief priests and unto the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death, and shall deliver him to the Gentiles to mock, and to scourge, and to crucify him: and the third day he shall rise again."

Is there any evidence that what He had explained to them was going to happen to Him had been accepted and believed? I think not.

"Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father."

The eyes of the mother of James and John were upon the glorious kingdom of the Messiah which she, and doubtless all of the band of followers, thought was soon to be manifested. Verse 24 tells us that "when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brethren." Their thinking was still very much fixed upon the imminent appearance of the glorious kingdom of the Messiah.

That thinking, that mind-set, stemming from centuries of false teaching and an inaccurate exposition of the



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words of the prophets, were still at work in the hearts of the two on the road to Emmaus and explains their utter disappointment and dismay. What all the prophets had said about the Messiah had been met with unbelief. That is what the Saviour diagnosed as the cause of their disconsolation.

Today

Can we learn from this? Yes, I believe we can. I am sure that we can parallel the false views formed by the Jewish people and which were the basis of the opposition of the apostles to the Saviour declaration of what would take place at Jerusalem and which later gave rise to the terrible despair into which the disciples were cast when things did not work out as they thought they would, and which the Lord called 'unbelief'.

I believe that the same mind-set is at work amongst those who denounce that view of the prophetic Scriptures which is based upon the simple premise that what God says is true! The spirit of Peter in Matthew 16:22 was that of the devil's rejection of God's Word. It was Satan that was at work then and it is Satan who still promotes a rejection of the simple words of Christ and urges men to place their notions above the plain teaching of Scripture!

Manifesto

The manifesto of the Sovereign Grace Advent Testimony ([read it here](#)) states clearly our view of understanding Scripture. "We adhere to the principle of receiving the Word of God, in its literal sense, except where obviously figurative." In other words, what God says He means us to accept literally, except where it is clearly allegorical or figurative.

The Jews did not take as literal the wonderful words of Isaiah when he spoke of the sufferings of the Messiah in Isaiah 53. Rather they thought to force another interpretation upon them because what Isaiah was saying did not fit in with their notions of what the Messiah was coming to accomplish.

What God said had to give way to their prejudged and prejudiced perceptions!

Still at work

That view, that foolish principle is still at work amongst God's people, not regarding the Messiah's first coming but about His second coming!

I say this as kindly as I can. I have, over the years, encountered notions regarding Revelation 20:1-10, to mention just one portion of prophetic Scripture, which can only be termed 'foolish'!

The simple and plain words of the passage which deals with Satan being bound and cast into the bottomless pit, and shut up for 1000 years, so that he should deceive the nations no more, are treated with derision by those who reject the simple meaning of these words.

It is sad and distressing to hear the mockery in the voices of those who scoff at a literal understanding of these words.

Indeed, these rejectors are quite prepared to advance the preposterous notion that the 'binding of Satan' which is clearly stated to be subsequent to the Saviour's return in glory, has actually already taken place. Indeed, this is insisted upon, despite the clear teaching of Peter on the subject of Satan's present state. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour," 1 Peter 5:8. These words of Peter are then subjected to a convoluted and serpentine theory of interpretation which really beggars belief, especially when it is promoted by those who claim that they believe the Bible from cover to cover and take God at His word and would contend for a literal 'six day creation', yet are ready to fly in the face of the plain meaning of Peter's words and insist that Revelation 20:1-3 has taken place and is in force at this moment and that Satan is not walking about as a roaring lion!

Surely such a spirit, such an attitude, must earn the same rebuke as that which the Saviour levelled against



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the two on the road to Emmaus.

'I don't believe'

Many, many times, when discussing prophecy, as I have set forth the simple words of God and claimed that they are to be understood to mean just what they say, I have met with a response that begins: "I don't believe those words mean that."

That was the attitude of the disciples to the words of the prophets regarding the sufferings, death and resurrection of the Messiah. That attitude earned the two on the road to Emmaus the rebuke of the Saviour.

Is it not a sobering thing to contemplate that such a rebuke must still be levelled against disciples, including preachers, who refuse to embrace "all that the prophets have spoken"!

Dear Christian, do not insist upon a man-made system of prophetic interpretation, exalting it over the simple embracing of what God has plainly said. Those who do surely must come under the same dreadful condemnation that Christ directed at the Pharisees and scribes in Mark chapter 7. "And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition," verse 9. Tampering with God's Word in order to accommodate our notions and traditions is a fearful thing!

Brother, simply believe what God has said, knowing that no matter how contrary to the notions of man and popular theology, God is able, to the letter, to fulfil exactly His Word.

Rev Ivan Foster

4th February, 2016.