

METHODS OF BIBLE STUDY

By

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CHAPTER NINE

NEW TESTAMENT SUBJECTS

WE have now to consider the very fruitful method of the study of the New Testament by topics or subjects; and if the Old Testament is so helpful in this way, much more will the New Testament prove suggestive and inspiring to all who will thus "search" this portion of the Word of GOD. It is obvious that only a very few suggestions can be made, but these will more than suffice to show the possibilities of this mode of study. We proceed on much the same lines as we did in considering Old Testament subjects.

LEADING IDEAS OF BOOKS

It is possible to find the leading idea or ideas of almost every book of the New Testament. We have already seen something of this in our study of particular books, but it deserves fresh emphasis. It is most valuable to discover the main thought of a book, and then to read and study it with this solely in mind. For the Gospels a suggestive, if sometimes fanciful, book is Alexander's *Leading Ideas of the Gospels* (second edition, Macmillan & Co.).

The same method can be adopted with great profit in the study of the Acts and the Epistles, and will prove of real service in any further and more detailed study of the particular book. Not at once will the "leading ideas" emerge, but they will, if we study rather than read.

THE LIFE OF OUR LORD

Taking the four Gospels as a whole, and using a Harmony, we should endeavor to obtain a picture of the earthly life as a whole, and be able to locate this or that incident in its place and chronological order. We know the Gospels in far too "scrappy" a manner. We cannot see the wood for the trees, and we have no sense of the historical perspective of the ministry. Dr. Stalker in his invaluable handbook on this subject (*Life of CHRIST*, T. & T. Clark, IS. 6 d.) suggestively and truly divides the three years into - the Year of Obscurity; the Year of Favour, and the Year of Opposition.

With a Gospel Harmony and Dr. Stalker's little work,* ordinary students will obtain all the guidance they require.

* This book is posted on our site - BBB.

THE MUTUAL RELATIONS OF THE GOSPELS

We have seen in a former chapter something of the special feature of each Gospel, but it is also necessary to look at them as a whole.

Four Gospels and one Lord! Why? Because they are four distinct though connected pictures of His Person and Work. In the early Church it was fancifully thought that the figures in Ezekiel 1 and Revelation 4:7 represented or illustrated the four Evangelists. If we take the latter text as an application only, we have the following:-

- (a) The Lion - Matthew - Kingship.
- (b) The Calf - Mark - Service.
- (c) The Man - Luke - Humanity.
- (d) The Eagle - John - Godhead.

Or we may consider four passages beginning with "Behold" and note:

- (a) Behold a King. Isaiah 32:1.
- (b) Behold my Servant. Isaiah 42:1.
- (c) Behold the Man. John 19:5.
- (d) Behold your GOD. Isaiah 40:9.

The aim is one and the same, but their methods and aspects differ.

- Matthew demonstrates (based on Old Testament) the Coming of an Expected Saviour;
- Mark depicts the Life of a Powerful Saviour;
- Luke declares the Grace of a Human Saviour;
- John describes the Possession of a Personal Saviour.

Matthew's is the Jewish, Mark's the Roman, Luke's the Greek, and John's the Believer's Saviour and Lord.

It is interesting to notice that they thus represent the order of historical and spiritual development; and it is worthwhile to remember that the last tact referred to in connection with our Lord in each Gospel also shows this true order of development:-

- (a) Matthew - The Resurrection - 28:6.
- (b) Mark - The Ascension - 16:19.
- (c) Luke - The Promise of the Spirit - 24:49.
- (d) John - The Second Coming - 21:22.

Can this have happened wholly "by chance"?

There is a very interesting and beautiful note on this topic in the introduction to Luke in the *Cambridge Bible for Schools*, by Dean Farrar.

BIOGRAPHIES

Here again, as in the Old Testament, we have a delightful study.

We should first dwell on the men and women whose lives are more prominent, especially the Apostles Peter and Paul. We could take Peter and find a sevenfold study:-

- (a) His Conversion. John 1.
- (b) His call to the Ministry. Luke 5.
- (c) His call to the Apostleship. Luke 6.
- (d) His great Confession. Matthew 16.
- (e) His Fall and Restoration. Mark 14.
- (f) His Work in the Early Church. Acts 1-12.
- (g) His Later Life. Epistles.

To mention Paul is to cover a large portion of the New Testament. We can study him personally from the historical and spiritual standpoint, noting seven stages:-

- (a) His Antecedents. Acts 8 and allusions in Epistles.
- (b) His Conversion. Acts 9.
- (c) His Earliest Christian Work. Acts 9-12.
- (d) His First Journey. Acts 13 and 14.
- (e) His Second Journey. Acts 16.
- (f) His Third Journey. Acts 18.
- (g) His Imprisonment and Probable Release. Acts 21 to 28.

Or we may consider his Epistles and study them chronologically, regarding them as covering his life symbolized as a day:-

- (a) Morning: 1 and 2 Thessalonians.
- (b) Noonday: Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans.
- (c) Afternoon: Colossians, Philippians, Ephesians, Philemon.
- (d) Evening: I Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy.

Two little books of great value on Paul's life have been recommended in an earlier chapter, Findlay's and Stalker's. * They will repay very careful study.

* This book is posted on our site - BBB.

We must not fail, however, to notice the more obscure characters of the New Testament.

There are many lives of which we have little information, but when the various passages are combined and compared they yield much fruit for heart and life. Such are the lives of John the Baptist, Andrew, Barnabas, the Mother of our Lord, and many more.

We may take the last named as a specimen of what is meant. If we collect the passages referring to Mary the Mother of JESUS, we may note these five periods:-

- (a) Unquestioning Trust. Luke 1:38.
- (b) Perplexed Consideration. Luke 2:9, 50, 51.
- (c) Distinct Error. John 2:1-11, and Mark 3:21-31.
- (d) Deep Darkness. John 19:26.
- (e) Full Sunlight. Acts 1:14.

The life and character of Barnabas can be similarly traced in several sections. So with many more. The field is almost inexhaustible, and we commend it heartily to every student.

OTHER TOPICS

1. The Miracles of our Lord.

These should be classified as to their character, subjects, and purpose. Distinguish between miracles on nature and on man, and between miracles of beneficence or of judgment.

Note the eight (7 + 1) recorded in John as giving eight "signs," or aspects of our Lord's work, manifesting His glory (John 2:11). Consider also their results on enemies and disciples.

2. The Parables.

Dwell on the reason for this method, after a year's ministry without it (Mark 4). *Parables were a test, concealing the truth from the indifferent and revealing it to the earnest.* They served to sift the crowd of hearers who had been following our Lord. Study the seven parables of Matthew 13, and mark their character and order. Is there any spiritual and historical connection between them?

Note the five parables of Luke 15 and 16, and observe the special and intimate connection between the first three and the last two. Ponder the rest of the parables, classifying them as to time and purpose.

3. Our Lord as a Teacher.

What were the characteristics of His teaching? Authority, boldness, power, graciousness, and uniqueness are seen. Wherein does he differ from other great teachers? Is it not in His claim to be uniquely related to and sent by GOD? Study the development of His teaching, and also what a recent little book has called the *Ruling Ideas of our Lord* (by Dean D'Arcy). *The Teaching of JESUS*, by T. G. Selby, will also be found suggestive.

4. *The relation of Paul to our Lord.*

How much of the early life of CHRIST is alluded to in the Epistles? How far are the great teachings of Paul found in germ in the Gospels? Paul claimed to be an echo, and no more than an echo, of CHRIST. See how this comes out in every writing.

5. *The Early Church.*

Study the Acts and Epistles. Note the birth, life, growth, fellowship, dangers, sins, service, joys, and hopes of Apostolic Christianity.

6. *The Second Advent.*

Note its different aspects in the Gospels, and the peculiar contribution of each writer of the New Testament to the meaning of the "**blessed hope.**"

7. *The Seven Churches of Asia.*

Dwell on the characterization of each Church, its strong and weak points, the warnings, encouragements, and promises.

So we might go on, but space fails. A study of the topics of the New Testament is among the most important methods of obtaining a thorough knowledge of the substance and detail of the books. First master the facts, and then see how they become factors and forces in human lives.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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