No. 43.

Directions for reading the Scriptures.
Acts, viii, 30. - "Understandest thou what thou readest?"

This is the question addressed by Philip to the eunuch, whom he found sitting in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah. It was a favorable moment for the Apostle to bring conviction to the heart of the Ethiopian nobleman; for he was seriously engaged in a good employment; he was reading the Scriptures, apparently with earnestness and delight. This bespeaks a mind willing to be instructed by seeking and by direction, a mind accustomed to think seriously on serious things; prepared to open every avenue to conviction, and welcome truth honestly and fully. All this indicates the candor and docility of the eunuch; but all this was not enough. The Apostle found him deeply engaged in a most inti
eating part of the prophecy of Isaiah, but still something more was necessary. There still remains an important question: 'Is that the question all for which I asked you, or is it the moment of their meeting? If you understand that, you may understand the meaning.- This plain, direct enquiry led immediately to the conviction of baptism of the eunuch.

Now, my dear sir, the same question, as it was addressed to the noble convert, may be addressed with propriety to persons of this or any age. We may ask every man, when he takes his Bible into his hand, 'understandest thou what thou readest?' And every man will decide whether or not he does read the Bible in vain. It is not enough that we have the Scriptures in our hands, or that we possess them with care and diligence. The question is, whether we comprehend their meaning; whether we have the same ideas of the truths in our minds as were in the minds of the sacred authors when they wrote. Perhaps there is no book which is read so much as of which so little is understood as the Bible. We are inclined to be satisfied with having gone over so many chapters and verses, because we think it almost to go over them. Very often we do not once think whether we have understood what we have read. Nor is it manifest, that this carelessness with regard to the meaning of Scripture must have a permanence in influence on our knowledge of the truths of religion, of our practice of its duties. The height of revula

tion is indeed pure and clear; but how shall we be guided by it, if we do not discern the path on which it leads us? The Scriptures are a divine treasure, but, or not, we shall make of the treasure, if we do not know its value? The sacred volume gives us principles of truth by rules of study; but engrave for the sense of what is written in this volume, how can we expect that we shall gain a vivid impression of these principles, so that our lives will be guided by them? In that, if we do not understand the Bible, how can it be us in any proper sense a rule of faith and practice? Yet we are very apt to take up the word of God and read it, as a matter of course, as a task which under all of circumstances makes it necessary to perform, and when the task...
is finished, we lay down the book; I seldom stop to summon our recollections, 
whether we have any distinct impressions stamped on our minds by the pas-
sage; or if we do attach any meaning to what we have read, it is but too often that meaning we tradition
of education has handed to us. Yowk we have received, and do most of our
objects, without enquiry without examination.

I propose in this discourse to give a few remarks by
on the manner of reading the Scriptures with profit, with understanding of their sense.

The first rule, and I shall mention, by which we may be con-
sidered as a preachment. A second rule, is that we shall
bring to the haunt of the Scriptures minds free, honest, free from prejudice. We must go to the Bible
with but one object in mind, that is, to learn what
it teaches; next to confirm; settle deeper the opinions
on our minds, which have previously formed. There is no greater en-
mory to the truth as it is in Jesus, than prejudice, or pos-
session of any sect or whatever. Nor is there any dis-
 ease of the mind, which is so deceitful in its operation.
Prejudice enters the heart by a thousand unnoticed as-
ences; it grows up with the growth of our opinions,
feelings; it winds into the recesses of the soul; it
fastens itself upon the notions of our youth; before they
are formed, it invests itself with them. It makes
its roots deep, and strong. It casts its cold, deadly shade
over our views, as they gradually develop themselves from
childhood to old age; and, the time we are so aware
that this enemy to truth has such strong
feats; on our minds, we form ourselves on our own notions, on our own mind, are
unarmed and possess the possessions; as so many chains, so heavy, that we no more feel their weight.
It is a fact of common observation, of experience to almost
every one, that the ideas concerning religion which we have
received from education are introducing ourselves, as very
little, from the other numberless sources of influence, are very
little, from the Scriptures, with which we have been
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just for what we have already been taught & have already believed. We read the Bible, it is true, but is this what purpose? Like the blind man, we go to the guide of Jesus has sent us, but we do not take him to recover our sight, but to confirm our blindness. It is only observed by one of the best divines of his time. He has seen that "men come to the understanding of the Scriptures with preconceptions & ideas of doctrines of their own," & then no wonder that the Scriptures look like pictures, wherein every man in the room believes that the look on him only, that whereas he stands, or how often soever he changes his station, Why is it that the word of God has been so darkened, by perverted, wrestled by the unnatural means of the false glosses of men? It is because men, before they have examined the Bible, have their particular scheme already marked out, & fenced round, & guarded in their minds, & if they cannot find this scheme in the sacred book, they must strain every expression & accommodate every passage not stands in their way, till the whole is measured, pressed, & squared to the propositions of their favourite system. Perhaps there is one who often refers to the whole mass of his thoughts & opinions on religious subjects could discriminate at any point between those which he has received from early prepossession & these which he has found their sanction in the Word of God. In most minds the light of truth & the darkness of prejudice are mingled together; & it is a most difficult, though necessary task, when we take the sacred vials into our hands, to divide between this light & darkness. But it is not vain for us, my brethren, to gather together all the ideas, we have received from a thousand different sources; & then say we learned them from the Bible. To the impression of these instructions, which God has communicated by his Son, we must present minds unburdened by the false and unmechanical schemes of man's speculations. When we approach the source of truth, we must dismiss all the systems we have built up, all the theories we have formed, all the prepossession we have cherished; & sit down with sincerity & reverence to learn what our Lord has to teach us. The reason why it has been corrupted by errors, or have grown hazy with age, is that in all ages men have endeavored to accommodate the Scriptures to whatever notions they have received from education or have cherished with all the habitual associations of their early years. Thus the
the early days of the Gospels, the wise men among the Fathers, who became priests, mingled with it all their previous opinions, and formed a concordance of ceremonies. And it has been the custom of exponents to the ancient fathers, since. We have not the same prejudice it is true, but we have many others, (owing to impressions formed deeply in the mind at an early period of life) that are probably susceptible of all impressions. These we must branch out, clear them away from their strongholds, if we hope to understand the Bible. If there are dark clouds resting around the temple of truth, we must scatter them, before we can discern the majesty of its proportions or the beauty of its structure.

The rule for understanding the Scriptures is, that we should have a constant reference to the characteristic peculiarities of the several books, to the time and circumstances in which the authors wrote, to the objects with which they had in view in these writings. We are too much accustomed to read the Bible with the same impressiveness as if we should bear if it were all written in modern times, and correcting the circumstances and views of our own nation's age. So long as we view the sacred writings in this light, it is impossible to understand them in their true original sense. The Scriptures are a collection of the different productions of different men, raised up by God's providence, during the lapse of nearly three thousand years; of course, their plan, purposes, & methods, must be as various as were the circumstances & agencies under which they were composed. If it is clear that he who is debarred from the value of interpretation, is one mode of explanation, to books marked with such distinct characters, each variety, must be able to explain every part in the contents of the Bible. We must be convinced that each book requires to be considered on a distinct point of view, with a constant reference to its peculiarities. In the OT, we have the history, the religious instruction, the poetry, & the philosophy of the sense. From that moment of sublime elevation, when G. said, 'let there be light,' my lighting forth, & spreading its wings are the new firmament, down to the time when the voice of angels whirled in the birth of S. on the plains of Judea, each word in the volume of inspiration has its appropriate cha
activiticks, & its distinct object. In the Pentateuch
we have the history of creation, & of the selection of
the religious & political laws, ceremonies, & establish-
ment of the Jewish nation. The following books contain a
continued account of the same people, of their settle-
ment in the promised land, of their wanderings from
the land of their fathers, of their punishments for their
wanderings, of the successive growth of their religion,
establishment of the building & services of the tem-
ple. In the Psalms we have the devotional worship
of the Hebrews, & while the monarch of Israel breaks
the strangle of his golden yoke, he calls forth from it the
rich, soul stirring strains of thanksgiving, & makes the
hymning notes of supplication, & makes it mean well
heart, wondering songs to the conference of praise over
the sins of this people. Then come the prophetic writ-
ings with their sublime predictions of the great events
that were to be developed in the far distant future,
with their solemn warnings, their bold denunciations,
with their authoritative counsels, all clothed in the rich
robe of Eastern imagery, incarnating in figures the very
ground with poetical ornament, & interwoven with art
turns to mental customs, frames of feelings. I pass
on to the N.T., we first find four separate histories of
our Lord's ministry, of the miracles he performed, the instructions
he communicated, the sufferings of death he endured, yet
each of these histories addressed to different people, with
a peculiar aim. Next we have the account of the preach-
ing of the Apostles, of the effects of that preaching. So
then succeed the churches of the Apostles written to various
communities of men, under different circumstances, full
of directions for particular, local cases. Describing various
events, one has opened a window into the lives of the
saints, cast of all in the Apocalypse, describing in turn the
gorgerous style of rockey the triumph of Getsemane, the Babylonian
unperfect religions of the world. Now only, from the brief
views of what the Bible contains, it is evident that you
would understand the sacred volume, we must consider
each book not as though it were recently published
for the first time in our own language among ourselves,
without any reference to the sacred book solemn
of these to whom it was addressed, but as coming forth
in an age remote from our own, a part of a history so vast
the present day can be considered only by the light of
history. The Scriptures bear on every page the impress of
peculiar circumstances & peculiar objects, it is not only
so to it is with the image of the character of the age.
character of the writers & therefore to understand them well we should have at least some knowledge of the history, feelings, prejudices, errors, speculations, notions of the people for whom they were first written. Let it not be understood to say, that the end of life does not send down a heavenly light to the half of time or as instrument of the divine institutions, the common motives, the established doctrines, of the bright pages of the Bible belong to equally with the same piece of statistics, who lived or in the books of the Bible were written. They are undiminished by distance, diminished by the lapse of ages. But my meaning is, that in order to understand the whole force of the arguments, illustrations, allusions, representations of the scriptures we must consider the circumstances of the time at which each book was written, the character of those to whom it was addressed, the object of purpose and the author had in view in his writings.

A rule for understanding the Scriptures is, that we should read them with a constant regard to the general scope and design. We should read through whole books and through the distinct portions of it, with one continuous, wide, uninterrupted and entire view of the artificial divisions into chapters verses. (I do this for many reasons, a misfortune to the readers of the Bible, that its contents are broken, subdivided by these distinctions). We are very much accustomed to consider them as of equal antiquity with the scriptures themselves, as marking out and distinguishing these parts as should be read together, by the aid of these distinctions we usually regulate our reading of the Bible. But the truth is, they are wholly of modern origin, were introduced merely for purposes of convenience. The Bible was not divided into chapters till the 17th century, and not till the 16th century, nor taken from the distinct portions of reasoning or narrative, frequently embarrass our attempts to understand its meaning. To preserve the harmony of Scripture, by keeping no separate particular subject, by separating...
out interruption. You shall then have a luminous consistent view of the whole. Besides, it should consist, especially particularly, of the connection of every passage we read, its relation to the preceding and succeeding passages. If we do not attend carefully to this point, we may make the Scriptures look with any voice, and we choose to give them. There is scarcely any foundation, or may not find a foundation in the Bible, if we consider each passage as an independent sentence, having no connection with other passages. It is because the Scriptures have been thus improperly considered, that the various sects, into each the followers of which are unshakably divided, all look with equal confidence to the scripture itself for the support of defense of their various opinions. They have taken separate sects & separate parts of the Bible, & have pressed them into their service, without the least regard to the connection or to the general purpose of the writer. It then mandates that the reader, instead of following the harmonious & uniting voice of Heaven, have been made to utter the confused & discordant sounds of Babel. It is the source of much error. Yet, I add, too, of many disputes without meaning, that the Bible is thus quoted & read, part wise, by pieces & fragments, & consequently of all the books of the Scriptures. The reader may well be restrained by the sense of a majestic stream, by divesting them, not a thousand animals as if the star, rod, and palm from a bath of condensed light, across the heavens, were scattered, & each left to shine as a small check amidst surrounding darkness.

A rule for reading the Scriptures, so as to understand their spirit & true meaning is, that we should explain the dark & figurative parts by the help of those which are clearly plain. In a book, like the Bible, written by men under the influence of circumstances be diverse from those in which are placed, in languages or different in their peculiarities, yet actions are, from our own, so much reasonable & close that there would be many passages not perfectly intelligible at first sight. Such passages are, by the difficulty of understanding them, much increased by the circumstance that they are shrouded under Eastern imagery, & that the words, in which they are expressed, are used in a sense quite remote from their common literal sense. Then
for, if all who have not that or capacity for those
researches, wh might then rightly use those observations, or solve these difficulties, indeed for all of us, it would be most profitable and prudential, to give
this closest and most devoted attention to those parts of
Scripture, which express the most grand and fundamental truths, at the same time, simple and plain truths, as to interpret it in conformity with these whatever may seem obscure or
strange, or that seek for improvement of purity of
heart, rather than to gratify curiosity. Should principally study those portions of the Bible, which describe the
character and providence of the Almighty, who give direct and practical lessons of duty, or bring before us the
impressure of our motives and our principles. There
are many incidental questions concerning subjects that
have no immediate connection with the general design
and purpose of revelation, if these questions may form inter-
esting topics of enquiry to those who have time &
means for the enquiry, but they should be no means
constitute principal objects of attention. Whatever
difficulties may appear to surround them, one may al-
ways presume, that they are to explained in perfect
consistency with the great, fundamental principles of
that religion which God has in many communicatet to man-
ity as a practical rule of life, adapted to the capacity
& comprehension of everyone; it is not a combination of
ideas to exercise ingenuity, but a system of plain pro-
found truths, by which we are to be saved. Therefore, we should
always read the Bible, with the impression that every
thing in it contains, however dark & difficult some por-
tions of it may appear, is to be explained in harmony with
the great moral design of revelation, as if we build en-
tirely upon allegories, or figure the metaphysical exca-

ges, then call them important & fundamental doctrines, we
should make use of the authority of heavenly truth to con-
form the errors to this by the glaring of our own inven-
tions or.

Such, my brethren, are some of the principles, by which we should
be guided in reading the Scriptures, if we would under-

dstand them in their purity. The communication is from

their, a very much imperfect one, yet the divine assist-
tance, it may serve to guide us to the true sense of the
sacred volume. (I shall speak on another occasion of
the motives and which we have to read the Scriptures with dif-
gence & with earnest attention). We should never forget
that all directions will be in vain, unless we bring to the perusal of the Bible humble and enquiring minds, with a sincere desire to become wise unto eternal life; by what we read; if we go to the Scriptures with such dispositions, we shall find them in truth our object, our light, and heavenly guide. We may then drink deep of that well of water whose springs the up unto everlasting life.

Nov. 1819.

Other, who art the source of truth, and the fountain of light, we pray that by the assistance of thy holy Spirit we may read thy Word, and with understanding heart, may more and more profit. May our minds be enlightened, and in the Scriptures of truth, be taught, and when we come to the commandments of God, may we be enabled to find there the rule of duty, and the way of salvation. To thee we look for guidance and direction, beseeching thee that we may understand the sense of the sacred oracles. To study the volume of revelation, that our hearts may be sanctified, let our minds be elevated by the instructions of the holy word. Thou hast shed upon our path light from heaven, we pray that we may everwalk in that light, and rejoice in its brightness. While we remember that these things were written, that we might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that being we might have life through his name, may we do greater works, ye shall receive a full of glory, through the Son of man has loved us.
At Home, Dec. 12th, 1819 - forenoon.
At M's York, Feb. 20th, 1820 - forenoon.
At M's Phipps (Boston) June 11th, 1820 - afternoon.
At M's Warie's (Bost.) June 18th, 1820 - forenoon.
At M's Pierce's (Brookline) Sept. 10th, 1820 - afternoon.