No. 193.

Errors from not knowing the Scriptures.
Matth. xxii, 29. "Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures."

There are two ways in which religious truths may be acquired or imparted. One is, by the unassisted efforts of reason; the other, by a written revelation sanctioned by proper and sufficient evidence. Each of these is attended by its peculiar difficulties. The former is liable to much imprecision and weakness; the latter to much abuse and misunderstanding. The speculations of mere reason are in many respects an insufficient guide to religious truths. Reason can prove many truths, yet it cannot discover; and therefore unless it is strengthened and guided by some superior assistance, it will usually stagger and be sometimes blind in the pursuit. The history of religion furnishes plentiful evidence, that, man on his own account, left to himself in this sacred subject, wanders...
he knows not where, if at all, attain to such views of religion, as will reach the heart of sanctify or support it. But there are difficulties of another kind, attending a written revelation. They arise not from a deficiency of the means of knowing religious truths, but from the abuse or perversion of these means. A book is from its very nature, exposed to all these misinterpretations, whether the ignorance, or the various fancies, or the favorite party views of different men may put upon it. It becomes a subject for majority to exercise its generality upon, a storehouse for various opinions to draw from, a resource for the uninformed to furnish arguments, who being misapplied prove nothing. Reason is like the dim twilight, in which objects are faintly perceived, or seldom realised in their full proportions; revelation is like the broadest streams of light, in which though it be “light from heaven,” man may see to go astray.

Now to these, both these sources of religious truth are open; if of course items are exposed to each of the
kinds of errors of imperfection with which I have mentioned.

It is however to these only, which concern revelation, that
I would now call your attention. It may, in the lan-
guage of my text, be truly said, that men do err,
not knowing the scriptures.” The book, which contains
the Jewish or extra revelations, as they are called, is the
source from which almost all our religious ideas at
the present day are drawn; of course, the errors and
abuses to which this book is liable, must have an exten-
sive and intimate effect on the religion of the two world.
The great mass of mankind, thus as well as others, may
be said to receive their religion upon authority, i.e.
to say, they receive what they suppose to be taught
them in the sacred book. Now a religion which is re-
ceived upon authority, is always more exposed to abuse
of perversion, than one which men reason out for themselves.
What the mind embraces as the result of its own
speculations and investigations, will be more likely to
be well grounded and firmly retained, than that which
is taken upon trust, however well or rationally founded.
that trust may be. The several flattering of a book may
of course be interpreted in a great variety of signification.
combined with ingenuity be but just upon the work. And the Bible may be thus interpreted, as much as any other book. Perhaps more than any other. Those who have not the necessary means of forming a judgment for themselves, will be as likely to receive one comment as another, as will swallow any absurdity, believe in any contradiction, without perceiving it.

Thus they will forever vacillate among the confused jargon of different explanations, & in all probability either lose their religion, or take up with some most absurd & foolish form of faith, cleave to it and afterwards in spite of its mischievous tendency & defiance of all reasoning. Thus men do err, because they know not the Scriptures. Now, as I think, that ignorance or misinterpretation of the true scriptures are among the most prejudicial causes of infidelity & religion, the subject seems of so much importance as to demand a brief notice of some of the ways in which it is manifest that we err by not knowing the Scriptures.

1. Consider, as an instance of what I mean, the story
construction on which has been put upon the prophetic language of the Bible. Here imagination has been allowed the widest range, and the wildest of most revolting expositions have been received as the infallible declarations of the word of God. The most bold and glowing expressions, such as figurative language could furnish, have even been understood in their literal sense, and predictions the most general in their nature have been limited to particular events according to the fancy of the interpreter, or have been imagined to describe just what men wished them to describe. For proof of this I appeal to the absurd and extravagant applications which have been made of the prophecies of the O.T. These prophecies are for the most part written in the most gorgeous style of Oriental rhetoric, hung around with all the ornaments of poetry, full of hyperboles, when a mind naturally adopts, that is carried only its subject, as by a rushing stream. They are almost entirely local and temporary, concerned only with the times of events then present, having nothing of anything,
to do with the far distant future. They consist of threats of promises to the Jews only, in connexion with the neighboring nations. I mean with no more propriety be considered as descriptive of the character of other nations in distant ages, than the history in the Pentateuch and other books can be considered as the history of any portion of the world, except of the Jews. The predictions are likewise, most of them, general and can scarcely be applied with any certainty to particular events. The prophets were the wise and venerable men of the nation, and were considered as the aged counsellors, monitors of the king and his court. When the orders of the chosen people abandoned their God, and pursued measures of ruin and disgrace, these reverend ones rose in indignation and threatened them with the desolating consequences of their misdoings. They spoke, as in the name of God, in lofty and glowing terms of burning accents fell from their lips; they dashed a thunderous fearful hand upon the chords, notes of terror rang in the ears of princes and nobles, while they joined the disgrace and witchcraft, that would fell death...
the land... till they threw bright gleams across the prospect, and spoke of a future golden age when the people shall obey their God and be blessed by Him... Such are some of the leading features of the foretold prophecies... Now it is manifest, that whoever takes these particular paintings of calamity or success or prosperity, and applies them at random to any nation or any age, must fall into great errors... He must not, not knowing the Scriptures, yet this is often done: and therefore we need not wonder at the vagaries and crude conjectures, of such subjects... Remarks of a similar kind may be applied to the use which has been made of the book of the Rev. of St. John... No part of the Bible has been perhaps so much tortured as this; no part has been so overloaded with wild and foolish attempts at explanation. Everything has been found there, all theorists and fanatics wished to find; the language is so very obscure and excessively figurative, that ingenuity may find a foundation for almost any theory. In fact, it may be remarked of all the sacred prophecy, that instead of being allowed to be, what it
is, the simple, native, majestic voice of ancient holy voices, it has been made to utter the confused discordant sounds of Babel. Sceptics have a great concern appeared to savage and desolate the earth, but some one has found out, that the finger of prophecy was pointing to him; seldom has a revolution so great calamity lighted upon any portion of the earth, but it could be shown by some one, that it was forepredicted ages before. In all this, men certainly err not knowing the Scriptures. We have no right thus to make the sacred books the object of a random fancy. It is presumptuous to connect together events of predictions just as we please, besides that it betrays a total ignorance of the nature of what we call prophecy. And it is still worse to tell the world what prophesies remain unfulfilled, when they are yet to be accomplished. Nothing is more likely to bring them into contempt, than this.

2. Another way in which men err by mistaking the Scripture is in connecting religion with everything in the Bible and making it answerable for every thing in it. By
this I mean that certain characters of events, which are described or recorded in the Scriptures, are treated as if the sacred writers approved them, as if the defense of support of them were necessary to the cause of religion itself. The characters of the good men whose lives are recorded in biblical history, are considered as sacred, that it would be almost profane to suppose that any stain or imperfection can rest upon them. Now this has no other effect than to draw ridicule and reproach upon religion and the sacred books. Take for instance the characters of Jacob, of David, of Solomon, notwithstanding there is so much to praise or severe, is there not something to condemn? Do they not great and dark faults, or why are such things more to be excused or defended in them than in other men? Must we not acknowledge, that St. Peter, for instance, notwithstanding his ardent and faithful devotion to the cause of his Master, was frank at times, violent, of a fickle? And did he not, in the hour of danger, barely desert and deny him?
then there merely no instances of scripture characters
who are stained with great faults. Nor to attempt
to represent these, either as no faults or as very light
ones, is doing but a poor service to the cause of
religion. It has been attempted, by ingenious tech-
istry, by making many explications, of taking much
is granted, to vindicate or palliate even the
crimes of some characters in scripture, for no other
reason. But because they are in the Bible, as
the Bible was ever meant to be a refuge for falsi-
tude and vice. Now, if we thus attempt to defend or ex-
cuse that to assume misconduct, which others may
shall severely condemn, we shall excite the fears
of every enemy to religion. We afford full triumph
to all who would rather scoff at the scriptures
than view them in a proper, rational, and edifying
manner. If we wish to do honour to the Bible
and religion, we must consider a judge of scripture
characters just as we do of other characters. We
must venerate their purity, admire and praise all that
is good in them; but duplicity, impiety, sensual
ty, & impurity; in short, all that is bad in them, we 
must censure with the like freedom & severity, that 
we would censure the same qualities in any other 
men. Vices are not to be represented as if they were 
not vices, because they are found in connection with 
great & good qualities; men err, not knowing the (

atures, when they make such representations. Similar 
remarks may be made with regard to some historical 
passages of the Scriptures. There are sometimes records of 
transactions of conduct, in which religion & morality 
can approve. These are frequently eagerly laid hold of 
by such as are disposed to throw contempt upon the sa-
cred books; if their unhallowed designs have been not 

a little counteracted by the unnatural & strained at-
ttempts, as have sometimes been made, to explain 
away such transactions, or to reduce them to accor-
dance with the principles of pure morality. We ought 
to remember, that religion stands entirely independent 
of all such things, & that many of the events recorded 
in the Bible are not recorded with approbation, nor in 
connection with religion, as a divine principle of action. 
We may do much injury to the cause of sacred truth 
by overstating it with unnecessary & foreign incumbran
ces, & connecting its state & character with that of other
things, rest on a rotten foundation, & cannot be
defended on principles of reason or good morality.

3. Men do err, not knowing the Scriptures" when they
forget that the Bible is an ancient book, & apply all
as they find in it, literally to the circumstances of the
present times. This is an error which pervades a large
portion of the reasoning & belief of those about their re-
ligion. It is manifest to every one, who reads the
Scriptures with any due degree of preparatory know-
ledge, that the books of which they are composed were
in the stamp of the times, & in their immediate de-
sign were peculiarly adapted to the wants & circum-
stances of the age in which they appeared. Of course
of the language, taken in its proper & common sense,
was local. Many of the expressions such as would
apply exactly to no time, but to the time for which they
were intended. This is a truth of great importance.

... This is a truth of great importance.

don't need give us no apprehension, for it will not

... ask us of one of the good principles & hopes, or one of the

... comforts & joys of our holy religion; for these things

... I speak as temporary local in their nature, are
For the most part nothing but the external mode
representing and impressing religious truths, the divi-
se investments in such religion stood feith to the
men of that day; we are still left to infer from
principles, equally applicable to us as to them,
of the highest importance to our moral & spiritual
welfare... Or it may be, particular actions of a particular
cause of conduct were required of them then, inherent
instance of what I mean may be
found in the precept "take me thought for the mor-
- saying what shall we eat? or what shall we drink?
- wherein shall we be clothed?". It has been ob-
jected by the enemies of God, that this precept indicates
an entire thoughtlessness about the future, what
a manifest would soon bring mankind to the
ness of ruin... Thus they eat, not knowing the scriptures.
The truth is, that it is not a general precept, nor
in any way intended for us. It was meant for par-
ticular men at a peculiar time, i.e. for the immediate
disciples of... was very appropriate for men in their
situation. They were placed in very extraordinary cir-
cumstances, were to be engaged in such duties, could
render it impossible for them to provide for the future.
But it is not so with us:—it is our duty, as we learn from other passages of Scripture, as well as from reason, to provide carefully for the future. Take, as another instance, the following declaration: our Saviour says, "if anyone come to me, I hate not this father's method: if thou saidst, 'you and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.' This certainly seems very harsh at first sight. But we are to remember, that to hate here signifies merely to love less, other considered with reference to the peculiar circumstances of the first disciples, it is perfectly rational. They were so surrounded with hostility and danger, even from their relatives and friends, that they would sometimes be compelled to sacrifice even the dearest affections of life to the devotion to the cause of . And this, however painful, was then necessary. But let no one say, that we, at the present day, are required to renounce the sympathies of affection of kindness and friendship, in order to be religious. It is our sacred duty to cherish the affections of social life; this we may do in perfect consistency with the most pure and sanctified religious feelings.

Similar remarks may be made upon some parts of the reasoning in the Epistles, such as that about being justified by the deeds of the law. Reasoning if this
kind was addressed to Jews only, it was built solely on Jewish feelings, opinions, and reference to Jewish events. These are a specimen of the passages to which I allude. I say that some parts of Scripture are local, often drawn from them universal duties, it is plain that we know not the Scriptures...

...We do err, not knowing the Scriptures, when we derive from them such doctrines as are repugnant to the reason and moral feelings of man. Scurvy has a greater influence on the human mind than any other disease. The Scriptures have been strangely tortured and applied to the support of systems and opinions, which were not for the sake of custom, but for the sake of the love of gradual acquaintance, and would require a stern heart to view without shuddering. Instead of that heavenly voice, which proclaims good things and great joy, the Bible has been made to utter a voice, which is like the voice of the inspirations of the heart, with a withering power, which teaches man that the perfection of religion is to fight against and to destroy the present constitution. For God has given him, that he may fit himself for another world only by disqualifying...
ing himself to live in this. It seems as if nothing but an unreasonable unscriptural religion would suit the taste of the greatest part of mankind; for the history of every age shows, that the majority have always had but little relish for the simple truths of God's word, and have craved eagerly after mysteries & abstractions. To satisfy this appetite, theological systems have been constructed, that have been built upon partial selections of passages of Scriptures, interpreted in the most arbitrary & distorted manner. The reason, why men thus err, is because they knew not the Scriptures, knew them not, I mean, as they ought to be known. If you will take parts of the Bible at random, & put them together without any regard to the connexion in which they stand, or to the circumstances for which they were adapted, you may, to be sure, prove anything from the Bible, however absurd, & make it appear to be a part of divine truth. If you will not apply the same fault & common sense principles of interpretation to the Scriptures, as to other books, it is no wonder if you find in them the most extravagant & irrational doctrines, such as will excite
only the contempt & disgust of the reflecting part of mankind. Let us remember, that we are under a solemn obligation to bring no reproach upon the cause of religion by our ignorance of the Scriptures. It is touching the ark of God with unclean hands. By such errors we may be answerable for much injury to the cause of our Redeemer.

These, my friends, are a sample of some of the ways in which men err, not knowing the Scriptures. And now, it may be thought by some, that this view of the subject is enough to discourage one from reading the scriptures at all. If we are liable to so many errors, it may be asked, how shall we know when we are right? But by all means let us be careful on this subject to make the proper distinctions; otherwise we may abuse an important truth to our own moral disadvantage. There are undoubtedly many things in Scripture which we cannot explain or understand properly without some preparatory knowledge, &c., &c., if we are not versed in these explanations, we may abuse the wrong meaning. But why explain of this? There is still abundantly enough of the Bible that is perfectly intelligible, for all the
in purposes of our salvation... The first, simple, plain, simple truths, which concern man as an immortal being, are obvious to all, if we fail to find them, it must be on our own fault... God has told us what he will have us to do, in order to be saved, in terms as clear, as if they were written in sunbeams. To these few, plain, plain, important truths, turn, turn. I entreat you to adhere in these, expend all your strength on real - shew mysteries and obscurities, hard discussions to such as have a taste for them, or are qualified to agitate such things understandingly... A good, honest heart, fearing God, fearing to do wrong, is in little danger of wandering far from the essentials of divine truth... "Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God." Lead the lives of good men... read your Bibles with the earnest desire to make your hearts better... of them, believe me, you have no need to fear, that you shall err by not knowing the Scriptures... May 1823.

At home, May 25th. 1823. - forenoon. -
At Mr. Ripton's, Nov. 7th. 1824. - afternoon. -
At home, July 30th. 1836. - afternoon.