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On Stage—But Which Act?

THE PRACTICAL NEED FOR AN OVERVIEW

There is confusion in the minds of many Christians today. Their bewilderment arises when they are confronted by a rapidly changing environment and look to God for a courageous and appropriate way to live. In turning to God they have few doubts about His love and care for them. Yet understanding what God *actually requires* at any given moment is often difficult.

To discover this we need to know what God Himself already assumes about the moment in history in which we find ourselves. We also need to be fluent with the work of the Holy Spirit within us. We must be aware of our obligation to make decisions (an obligation granted us by God's gift of freedom). And we must take into account the presence of an active enemy of God and mankind who is at work in the world.

These factors—the sovereignty of God, the significance of men and women, and the reality of the devil—are all things God teaches us about through the revelation He has made in history, which is recorded faithfully in the Bible.

Some people think we can simply lump all these factors, and the enterprise of discerning God's mind, under the term 'guidance'. And in a sense they are right. But that is not always helpful, because although the help of God in any given situation is promised, discerning that help in the actual moment is not easy. When we face the pressure to make immediate decisions, and know that we do not have the encyclopaedic grasp of the Scriptures we think we need, we can find our courage failing. Or having decided, we find that our confidence in the decision we have made is threatened.

It is right to remind ourselves that God is our God, that He knows our times and circumstances, and that even in our ignorance of His Word He will come and meet us. But it is also true that we must attempt to understand the Bible so that we approach our decisions with an understanding of His overall plan—or at least, as much of that plan as He has chosen to reveal.

Even if we have a thorough knowledge of the *texts* of the Bible, however, such knowledge does not necessarily help us to solve our particular concerns. Our real lack is the ability to put it all together in an orderly way, so that we can integrate the detail of the Bible in a *framework* on which we can build our thinking and practical living.

Our problem is how to apply what we read in the Bible to our life. It takes the form of questions such as these: If the Bible was written long ago, about times past, how is it relevant to my situation here and now? Is everything in the Bible to be carried out today as it was when first written? And if not, how can I separate what is to be done in the twentieth century from what is not?

The most important ingredient we need to solve these problems is an *overview*, a basic framework, which will enable us to understand the great themes of the Bible. Such an overview provides a confidence based on a grasp of God's overall plan—how each part relates to the other parts and how the whole comes together. This gives us a wonderful

insight into the mind of God, and allows us to obey Him better because it enables us to see how our position in history relates to the whole.

KNOWING WHERE WE STAND

In saying an overview is necessary, I do not mean we simply need a clever summary of the Bible story. I am thinking more of something like the scheme or outline of a stage play.

In the drama we're concerned with, the stage is history. God Himself is the main Actor. There is no audience; everyone is on stage. God requires that we play our supporting 'bit parts' faithfully, but our lines are not written for us to simply memorize and say. We are all *ad libbing*, playing our parts with a freedom given by God in such a way that we are not predictable.

Although we have this freedom, however, it is still possible for us to respond truly to the main Actor's lead. This can be done only if we understand three things: our present position in the drama, what has already occurred in past acts, and the ultimate goal of the play. In other words, we need to understand what has happened in the story so far, what is being done on stage right now, and where the whole drama is going. Without this knowledge we cannot act appropriately. Above all, we have to make our moves in harmony with the main Actor, who is in control. All this drives us to be very thorough students of the whole of the Bible.

This book uses a diagram as a form of shorthand to explain the main themes of 'the story so far', as it is shown in the Old and New Testaments. It also shows us where we are 'right now'. This means we will understand 'the story so far' from the perspective of where we stand now. We will not just be recounting the story: that would be an *historical* study. We will be looking back over past events to understand God's overall plan. In this way we get His perspective of the whole. This is a *theological* study. We will also look forward (as much as the Actor allows) to see how we are affected by

'where it is all going'. This is an *eschatological* study (from the Greek word *eschata*, meaning 'the last things', used in connection with the final purposes of God). God has placed us in the final act of His drama; we are on stage at a time when the curtain could come down at any moment. Everything that has gone before looks forward to the present age.

ACTION

Recognize the need to understand the whole plan of God. Resolve to read the Scriptures prayerfully, asking God to show you how each part you read fits in with the rest. In this way, you 'balance scripture with scripture'.

This means you will stay a careful reader of *individual* texts, but will also read *the whole* with understanding as a background to the texts. This is the first great key to rightly dividing the Word of truth.

READING THE BIBLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WHERE WE ARE NOW

Being 'on stage', involved in the action of God's drama, affects our Bible reading. When we read the Bible from this perspective, we realize that we are not called by God to mimic the people of the past. That would be like repeating the first act of the drama many times, and getting worse each time. We are in the same play, but a different act. However, the same God is there for us as He was for them. He is still 'on stage' as the Acting Director. Consequently, we need to be faithful to what He asks of us in *our* time, just as they were required to be faithful in their time.

This will certainly make a sharp difference to our Bible reading: we will read about what God has done in the past in order to learn about *Him*. Our primary concern is to know God. He is the Actor with whom we are now on stage; we must work with Him. In the past He did certain things. But now, because the historical backdrop has changed, we need to ask, 'What is He doing at *this* time? Where are we in His plan

now?’ Our central concern is to be dancing to the tune which God is calling now—not to any other tune played at any other time.

This means we must be prepared for the possibility that God may do something new—something He hasn’t done in quite the same way before. This is a very difficult lesson to learn, all the more so when we are fluent with what God has done in the past. We may be so caught up with expecting to see things happen in the way that they did then that we are not prepared to see a new thing now.

Our grasp of the framework must come from what God has said Himself, so throughout this book we will need to do some Bible study. We will confine ourselves to major themes, looking at the large blocks of Scripture which make up the whole. The observations we make on these sections of text will not be a full exposition. They will attempt to deal with the major ideas, but they will not satisfy the reader’s curiosity about everything.

The sections of the Bible quoted are lifted out of their scriptural settings. It is always sensible to pick up the Bible and read the broader setting of the text; in this way you become fluent with the events which lead up to the situation you are studying. Paying attention to the ‘context’ in this way is one of the best precautions to save us from error, and also assist our understanding.

THE PHARISEES’ MISTAKE

The inability to believe that God might do something new and unprecedented was one of the main problems of the Pharisees. We often find Jesus rebuking them for their failure to ‘understand the times’—a failure due, strangely, to the fact that they were serious about the Scriptures they had at their disposal.

Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, ‘How is it that

John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?'

Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and on that day they will fast.

'No-one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins' (Mark 2:18-22).

The focus for us here is the parable of the Bridegroom. The Pharisees were very serious Scripture readers, and they were absolutely intent on pleasing God—yet here they are rebuked by Him. The immediate context of the parable is the contrast between Jesus' disciples and those of John the Baptist and the Pharisees (v 18): why didn't Jesus' disciples fast when the disciples of John and the Pharisees did?

The Pharisees had acted on God's revelation in the Scriptures by reducing it to many laws. Their way of being faithful to God was to live by those laws. But in doing this they focused on the details of Scripture in such a way that they failed to discern its overall plan. They did not read it theologically. They tended to obey the letter of Scripture regardless of God's purposes. They applied past material to their present as if God had worked no changes in the meantime. They worked to the Book, not the mind of the God of the Book. Thinking that the Law, once given, was to be obeyed regardless of the times, they believed that their task was simply to spell it out in fine detail. In this way they attempted to update old instructions for changed situations, often deducing twenty or thirty

little regulations from one general law. This led them into a tight, legalistic system.

Jesus' rebuke is founded on the fact that (in His terms) the Bridegroom is having a party. It is a very special time. God's Son has come, and has called to Himself some guests (disciples). Because of this, it is now, for the moment, a time for rejoicing!

The sadness and irony of the Pharisees' position was that, despite their careful concentration on the texts, their view of the Scriptures (as Jesus shows in other parts of the Gospels) was in fact very uninformed. They concentrated on the text to the exclusion of the Author-Actor. They could not play their part properly because they missed the change of scene which He had brought. They did not read the 'signs of the times', even though they were warned severely that failure to do so could be disastrous.

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.

He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red," and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.' Jesus then left them and went away (Matthew 16:1-4).

ACTION

1 Read Matthew 23:1-36 thoroughly. Notice how strongly Jesus condemned the actions of those who burdened people with unnecessary requirements based on wrong practical conclusions drawn from the biblical text.

2 However, do not abandon your resolve to obey the Scriptures carefully. That would be to swing to the other extreme.

Resolve to struggle for the *meaning* of the text—for what it tells you about God Himself and how He wants you to think and act.

So we in our times will not attempt to do the same things as the people of the Bible; we will attempt to serve the same God. Yet we will serve Him in the time and place we occupy. Finding an understanding of that time and place is the task of this book.

As we will see, without a basic framework, such questions land us in a perplexing position, particularly with the Old Testament. Because they have failed to grasp an overview, some modern Christians believe the Old Testament has no more meaning for them than mere history—part of the story of the Jewish people. This mistake is tragic. It leads to a preoccupation with the New Testament to the exclusion of the Old. And because the Old Testament prepares the ideas and setting for the New, such a preoccupation denies them full understanding of the New Testament itself.

ACTION

Resolve to read the Old and the New Testaments in a balanced way. Expose yourself to large slabs of the Old Testament, particularly if you have neglected it in the past.

THE DIAGRAM

In this book we will concentrate on certain great turning points in the history of God's dealings with His creatures. These fixed points of reference will enable us to move all over the Bible and not lose track of the drama. There are six of these points, and their choice is mine. However, I am confident their selection is dictated by the biblical material itself.

So that you can see what is intended right from the start, here is a brief introduction to the framework. The six points are related to one another by the diagram. The diagram is not meant to tell us everything; diagrams never do. But it will

enable us to see the whole perspective in an uncomplicated way.

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Point 1 represents the events described in Genesis 1:1—2:24, the situation before the rebellion of man occurred (Point 2). We are allowed to see, by God's revelation, what we would otherwise never have been able to know after Point 2, namely, how God's creation was in the beginning.

From the material at Point 1, we learn some very basic things necessary for our living now.

2

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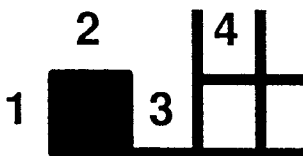


Point 2 is the Fall, the rebellion of man. What happened is recorded in Genesis 3:1–24, which describes the temptation of Eve and the result of the disobedience of the man and the woman. The action at Point 2 puts a mark on everything that follows. Life is not the same after the Fall; we now find ourselves estranged from our beginnings. This is why Point 2 is drawn as a block, even though it represents a moment. The

block conveys the very decisive separation of the situation at Point 1 from all that follows. It also illustrates the fact that we could never know about the original situation at Point 1 unless God, by revelation, had told us about it in language we understand now.

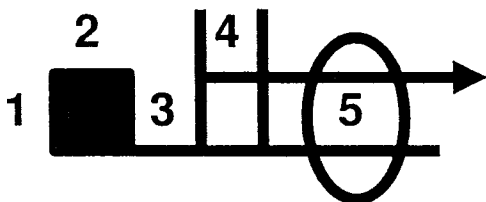


Point 3 is used in two different ways. Sometimes it signifies the whole period up to the events at Point 4. When it is used this way, it is referred to as Position 3. At other times it is specifically used to mean the coming of the Law in the narrower sense of the Law Code—God's explicit commandments to His covenant people Israel after the Exodus. The beginning of the horizontal baseline represents the start of an age of rebellion and disturbance which is alien to the position at Point 1. The line conveys the idea that from Point 2 onwards we live in a rebellious world.

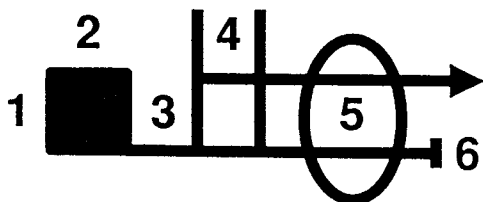


Point 4 represents the event of Christ's coming: His birth, life

and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. This is the meaning of the two vertical lines. They enclose the time of Jesus' ministry on the earth. The horizontal line above the baseline of the age of rebellion signifies the dawning of a new age: the age of God's rule—His kingship—which Christ has brought. We now have the two ages running parallel in history.



Point 5 represents our place, where we are called to be faithful today. The upper line of the new age continues parallel to the bottom line of the old. The ellipse signifies that the Christian life touches both the old and the new ages; we live with our feet firmly straddling the two. This is why our place is a place of tension. We are called to live at Point 5.



Point 6 signifies the end of the old age with the return of Jesus Christ and the creation of the new heavens and new earth. The new age of God's eternal rule, established by Jesus at Point 4, goes on for ever.

These six basic moves, discerned from God's revelation in the Bible, set the framework for our thinking. They reflect the major happenings in the history of God's people. They are not simply arbitrary selections drawn from the story; they are the key points, reflecting Jesus' statements of God's unfolding work.

ACTION

1 Prepare yourself for the rest of this book. Begin by praying carefully to God about your Bible reading. You may have some things to repent about: superficial reading, for example, or taking texts too much in isolation.

2 Submit your will to God by resolving in advance to be obedient to what you find in the Scriptures. Do not read the Scriptures without such a submitted mind.

3 Exercise faith (trust) in God, believing that with His help you can really grasp His overall plan. Do not believe it is just for clever people; it isn't. It is given by God for His people. Trust Him for this understanding.

4 Test everything you read by the Scriptures; do not trust what cannot be shown to be consistent with the whole Bible. Be convinced in your own mind. Pray for the Holy Spirit to help you.

5 Do not be afraid to think or use your mind. God, of course, grants us His Holy Spirit to make things clear. Resist any teaching which tells you to 'turn off your mind'—it is a deception of the Enemy. You may need to repent of accepting such a deception. If so, speak with God about it.

Before the next chapter: Read Genesis 1—3. Concentrate especially on the second and third chapters. Ask God to help you. Make some notes as you read. Make sure you do this before you go on.