

"REDISCOVERING THE BIBLE"

TEXT: "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my pathway."
Psalm 119: 105.

An 18th Century skeptic once remarked:

"It took twelve men to establish Christianity.
I will show the world that one man can pull it
to pieces. In one hundred years, the Bible will
be an obsolete book, to be relegated to the
dusty shelves of the antiquarian."

I think that you'd be interested to know that fifty years after this remark was made, that the very house in Paris where the prediction was offered was being used as a center for the distribution of the Bible. The critics and skeptics come and go, but the Bible still lives on far from having become a book relegated to the dusty shelves of the anti-quarian. Indeed, we are told that the Bible is in greater demand today than at any other time in history. We're told that our printing presses are turning out one Bible every six seconds, day and night, the year around. This adds up to 10 Bibles every minute, 600 Bibles every hour, and over 14,000 copies every day in the year!

Certainly these figures are very encouraging. But what concerns me is this: that the production and purchase of the Bible does not necessarily imply that the Bible is being read, or that it is having a great deal of influence in the lives of our people. It's true that the Bible is not an obsolete book relegated to the dusty shelf of the antiquarian, but it's also true that the Bible is gathering a great deal of dust on the bookshelf of many a home. I reminded of a story about a minister who one evening made a pastoral call in the home of one of his church members. It was a delightful call, and just as the minister was putting his coat on to leave, the lady of the house asked him if he would like to see the old, precious family Bible. The minister, of course, indicated that he would love to see their family Bible. And so the young mother turned to her little six year old son, Bobby, and said: "Bobby, run into the other room dear, and bring that big book that mother and daddy love to read so often" A few seconds later little Bobby returned carrying the Sears, Roebuck Catalog.

Today is Universal Bible Sunday. It's good for us to think seriously concerning the use of our Bible. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my pathway". Certainly the conviction of the Psalmist is still the conviction of those most deeply schooled in the things of the spirit. Even in our own tangled up time, the message of the Bible still points the way out and up. Today I'd like to have you consider with me three areas where we really need to rediscover the importance of the Bible.

IN THE LIFE OF THE NATION

In the first place, we need to rediscover the importance of the Bible in the life of the nation. The time has come for us to take up once again this book which brought our forefathers to this country. We've neglected it. In recent years, we have been ashamed of its outdated science, but perhaps it is not science that we really need. We have a great deal of higher education in this country, but apparently it is not high enough to get us to where we really ought to be. We have a new chemistry, and a new physics, but with each day that passes I began to wonder whether

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these will bring us a new heaven and a new earth. I think there's something in the Bible that we need, and until we with one accord begin to search the scriptures and make every attempt to live by them as a nation, then we're going to remain in trouble at home and abroad.

In the rotunda of the Capitol Building in Washington, D. C. there is a very great painting entitled, "Embarkation of the Pilgrims". We should be very grateful to the artist who painted the picture for he placed the open Bible in the very center, or the very focal point of the picture. The open Bible rests in the hand of William Brewster. Gathered about him are the other men. They're standing on the open deck of the ship. In a time when our way of life is being threated on the outside, and liberties are being threated on the inside, we need to have that scene burn deeply in our national conscience. For it means that America - her freedoms, and her finest ideals are all founded on the pages of that open book. And we need to remember that these freedoms will be preserved only as the message of that open book continues to live among us.

"If I were to have my way" said Thomas Marshall,
"I would take the torch out of the hands of the
Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, and in its
place put the open Bible"

IN THE EDUCATION OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE

If we are to rediscover the importance of the Bible in the life of the nation, then we need to begin by rediscovering the importance of the Bible in the education of our young people. This is the second area of concern.

A high school teacher recently conducted a Bible knowledge test in one of her English classes. She was quite disappointed at the low marks recorded by the young people. She discovered that 88% of the boys and girls could not even name the four gospels. One student suggested that the four gospels were: love, honor, cherish and obey. Another student suggested that three of the four were: Christianity, Hinduism, and Confusion! She also discovered that 98% of the class had no idea as to who Saul of Tarsas was. Well, you say, that's just one isolated case. Let's not judge all of our young people by this one particular case. It may have been in this city where the teachers have a more difficult time teaching because of the variety of religious and racial backgrounds. If this is the case, then this is even more reason why we should be concerned. We're told that close to 16,000,000 boys and girls are growing up in this country today without any church affiliation, and some of these boys and girls are not too far from this church.

Let me give you another illustration of what's happening in this whole field of religious education. Several years ago at the Harvard School for Boys, the Headmaster tested 250 boys on quotations from popular songs, and the Bible. It was a clever test, well arranged to obtain the desired information. First, the headmaster gave them a few words from popular song titles which they had to complete. These were some of the titles:

"Don't sit under the....."
"I'm dreaming of a"
"If your heart goes bumpity...."
"Bongo, bongo, bongo, I don't..."

The idea was to finish the line. The boys scored quite well on this part of the test, but they didn't do quite as well on the second part.

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Here are some of the quotations from the Bible that they had difficulty answering.

"Thou preparest a table....."

"Now abideth faith, hope and love, these three, but..."

"Why beholdest thou the mote that....."

"I will lift up mine eyes....."

These are just some of the examples. But by and large they did quite poorly. In fact the average mark was 23%, and over three-fourths of the class failed. What should concern is here is that for the most part these are the boys from the privileged home, the boys who will be leaders in our land tomorrow. Now I'm not suggesting that every boy and girl should be an expert Bible scholar, but what I'm driving at is this: that something is lacking in the total educational program in a Christian land when boys and girls are growing up totally ignorant of the greatest single force in life and history. It's not good and we should be concerned.

All of this presents a great challenge for the church school program. But I for one am not convinced that the one or two hours that a child receives in Sunday School or church each week is enough in the way of religious education and spiritual nourishment. His religious education should be equalled balanced with his mental, physical and social development. It needs to be supplemented by the home. And perhaps we should seriously begin to think about giving children religious education in the schools. Perhaps we should be offering courses in the high schools that have to do with the history of religion, the history of the Bible, and the application of Christian principles to social, economic, and political problems. It would be difficult to do, but it could be done if were done wisely. Knowledge of this type would not injure any student regardless of whether he might be Jewish, Roman Catholic, and Protestant. God's moral laws and spiritual truths undergird all great religions, and are as important as geology and geography. We spend a great deal of time teaching our young people the facts concerning the ages of rocks, but spend so little time teaching them the facts concerning the Rock of Ages!

IN OUR OWN PERSONAL LIVING

We need to rediscover the importance of the Bible in the life of the nation. We need to rediscover the importance of the Bible in the education of our young people. But if we are to accomplish both of these aims, then we will have to rediscover for ourselves a truer, more satisfying concept and use of the Bible in our personal living.

We have misused, mistreated, and misinterpreted the Bible on many occasions. We're treated it in a rather supersititious, mechanical, and literalistic fashion with the result that many people find little meaning in the Bible. Many people regard it more as some kind of a good luck charm than as the Word of God. James Claypool of the American Bible Society tells of a chaplain in the armed forces who one day was asked by a wounded soldier to find the verse in the Bible that would stop bleeding. The chaplain thought he was kidding at first, and then discovered that the boy was quite serious and felt that if he could put one hand on that verse, and the other on the bleeding wound, that he would then be all right. It's this type of a hocus-pocus attitude that people have toward the Bible that is doing more harm than good. This oversimplified and literalistic approach leads into confusion and trouble. The Bible doesn't deal with magic, but with truth. It is the record of man's search for God and God's search for man. And we need to remember that it was written by ordinary men, God inspired, but who at the same time were

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influenced by the framework of the time in which they lived. Nevertheless, here is the great source book of the soul with gifts of comfort, courage, faith and hope. Here is the real bread of life - with meat and drink for the inner man. Here of all the great books, is the one great book!

We need to take that book from the shelf, dust it off, open it up and begin to read it. Ah, but you say.....I don't know how to go about reading such a big book. Then let me give you three easy suggestions:

- First: Begin reading with the passages with which you're familiar. Spend some time each day reading a chapter. Start with the Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount, and 13th chapter of I Corinthians. Let them become a part of you. Learn them.....
- Second: Then begin to explore your Bible. Turn to the Old Testament, and get acquainted with some of those great personalities. Read the message of the prophets, all of the gospel accounts of Jesus, and the growth of the early church. And read these sections as you might read a fashion magazine, or the sports section of the paper.
- Third: Avail yourself of all opportunities to study the Bible under competent guidance. Buy a Biblical commentary. Become familiar with other translations of the Bible.

But don't stop here. Translate the reading into your pattern of living. All the reading is of little value unless you read some of it into your daily living. It's easy to get caught up in the small detail of this and that in the Bible, but it's not quite as easy to live according to the word of God. As Mark Twain reminds us:

"Most people are bothered by those passages of scripture they don't understand, but for me I have always noticed that the passages that bother me the most are the ones I do understand."

We need to use our Bibles more effectively. We need to translate the reading into our living. It has such wonderful treasures - treasures for every event and experience in life. It has a wonderful message of comfort for those burdened by the problems of life: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." It has a sharp message of challenge for those indifferent to the social conditions of our society: "Let justice run like water, and righteousness as a mighty stream". It sets before us a high standard of conduct: "Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father who in heaven". It has a message for those who have lost loved ones: "In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you". It's just filled with countless treasures which are for every mood and movement in life.

It was said of Abraham Lincoln:

"He built up his entire reading upon his early study of the Bible. He mastered it. He mastered it as he mastered only one or two other books in his lifetime. He mastered it so that he became a man of one book, and he put into practice what was in it."

I hope that sometime today, or sometime during the coming week, in the quiet and silence of your home, you'll seriously consider your own use of the Bible. Do you have a Bible? Have you mastered it? Or even better

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yet has it mastered you? Can people say of you: He's a man of one book. He puts into practice everything that's in that book.....in his home, in his business, and in all of his relationships with others. I sincerely hope that people will someday say this of you. Take your Bible from the shelf, open it up, and begin to read it.....and may the reading of God's word lead to the real living of it! Let it catch on fire in your hands and in your heart. This is my message to you on Bible Sunday, 1957. May we rediscover the importance of the Bible:

In our own personal living.
In the education of our children.
In the life of our nation.

LET US PRAY:

Our Father and our God, we are grateful for the lamp of thy holy word. We pray that it may ever shine in our pathway. Keep our minds open to new revelations of Thy truth, but save us from forsaking the source of wisdom which has refreshed us in times past, and brought comfort to the hearts of so many of Thy children. In thy name we pray. Amen

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TEXT: "I have found the book of the law in the house
of the Lord"

(II Kings 22: 8)

INTRODUCTION One of the most delightful and enchanting words in the English language is the word "serendipity". It's a happy, positive word, a word that sends off good vibrations. The dictionary defines "serendipity" as "the faculty for making desirable discoveries by accident". Like going to the store for a can of beans and finding a twenty-dollar bill along the way. Like going for a walk in the park and falling in love. Like going to a meeting in church and discovering God. Serendipity.

DEVELOPMENT A most notable instance of "making a desirable discovery by accident" in the Bible is associated with the name of the good King Josiah. This man reigned in Judah from 638 to 607 B. C. He was something of a statesman, a ruler who possessed a profoundly religious temperament. Accordingly, he directed that the temple in Jerusalem be restored to its earlier condition.

Now this great edifice had been neglected for centuries - 250 years to be exact. No one had really cared about its gradual deterioration. For a number of years, the people had contributed to its eventual restoration. And when the time came for the work to begin, the temple was an ant colony of activity. The carpenters were there, the stone masons and building experts of every description. Painters, polishers, cleaners and sweepers could be seen scurrying off in every direction.

In the course of this temple renewal project, an event of immense importance took place. One of the workers apparently got to poking around with his broom one day - or perhaps it was a mad dusting - and discovered a scroll so heavily overlaid with dirt that it was almost discarded.

This document was rescued and brought to the attention of Hilkiah, the High Priest. He immediately contacted one of the King's secretaries, Shaphan, by name and said, "I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord". Our story does not end there. Shaphan took the scroll home and read it. He perceived its significance and in turn brought it to the attention of King Josiah.

Josiah had this scroll read to him, and when he heard it, the record says that he rent his clothes. He appointed a small committee to consult with the prophetess, Huldah, on the meaning of this book. And then, in one of the most dramatic actions imaginable, he assembled the nation to hear this newly recovered word. As the narrative tells it in II Kings, chapter 22:

"The King sent and all the Elders of Judah and Jerusalem were gathered to him. And the king went up to the house of the Lord, and with him all the men of Judah, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and the priests and the prophets, all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the House of the Lord."

This book was nothing less than a portion of the Book of Deuteronomy. We're told that the reading of it touched off social, political and religious reform.

Idols were torn down. Astrologers, wizards and soothsayers were driven out. A unifying Passover was then celebrated. The covenant was reaffirmed. The worship of God was purified and centralized in Jerusalem.

MORE ON THE BOOK

"I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord". Think about that statement; it's a rather baffling and incriminating statement on Hilkiah's part. It's a bit like a minister saying, "I've discovered the Bible here in the Church". I mean - where else? Can you imagine a church without a Bible? It would be like a bank without money, or a drugstore without medicine, or a bakery without bread. And yet it happens - illogical and incredible as it may appear.

Now this "book" of law is not to be understood as simply a collection of statutes. I think we ought to understand that in Jewish parlance "law" means teaching, instruction, counsel. And Deuteronomy is one of the stellar books of the Old Testament. It was a book that was often quoted by Jesus. In fact, along with Genesis, Isaiah and Psalms, this Old Testament book is quoted more often than any others in the New Testament. This was the only book that really attempted to expound Israel's full meaning in history, describing in detail her calling as an act of grace. A great book!

And yet, the functionaries of the temple - the scribes, the priests, and the prophets that occasionally wandered through - yes, and the people themselves - allowed that book to become buried, lost from their possession. It somehow got buried under a mountain of rote, of ritual, of indifference. And what happened then can happen in the church, too, that the Bible - the living Word of God - to all intents and purposes can get buried, lost from view.

TODAY'S SCENE

So much then for that bit of serendipity back there in King Josiah's kingdom when the Book was found in the house of the Lord.

One of the most disheartening aspects of American life today is the absence of convincing leadership. Back in early November, a conference was held down in Washington that centered on the significance of Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire for America's perception of itself. One hardly needs the help of a moralist to see some ominous parallels between the downfall of Rome and some of our own struggles. In connection with that symposium, Millicent Fenwick, a Republican Representative from over in New Jersey, is quoted as saying,

"I can't believe that we are so helpless that we cannot somehow exert ourselves again to some vision of what we could become, knowing that we're not the center of the universe".

I think I understand that plea; surely there ought to be some way by which a truth outside ourselves can claim us and lift us up.

But often one has the feeling that all we're getting from each other is the same old static. Have you ever had to wait for your luggage at the airport? You get to the baggage area and that belt or cylinder keeps running the same pieces of luggage past you again and again - somebody's golf clubs, somebody's green suitcase, somebody's big cardboard box marked "FRAGILE". Round and round they go. At times I feel this way about our leadership - the same old phrases, same class slogans, same utopian ideologies, same statements reaching up from academia, the same super-patriotic proclamations.

Are we to swim forever in the backyard pool of our own sullied wisdom? And be guided only by the devices and desires of our own hearts? Is life nothing more than a story about me and mine, us and ours? Think about it. What is needed is some word "from beyond" that can grasp our attention and claim our sensitivities, compel our wills and unfold to our sight a vision that is worth getting stirred up about. And there is such a word.

OVEREXPOSURE We call it the Bible. We must rediscover that book in our lives. There are copies enough around, but its message does not really inform or govern our lives the way it should. Why? You can have a run at that question on your own time. Who knows, maybe part of the reason centers in our overexposure.

In recent years, I have grown to appreciate more fully the works of George Eliot. But it wasn't easy. Back there in 10th grade, somebody stuck a copy of *Silas Marner* in front of me and said, "read it". I never read *Silas Marner* with any great pleasure because of that early command in high school. Compulsion apparently is the enemy many times of appreciation. One hopes that these boys and girls who were given Bibles today will have a bit of an inborn desire to read it on their own, lest through compulsory "over-exposure" its powers should be lost to them.

A friend down in the Bible belt claims that the best thing that could happen down Nashville way would be for everyone to stop using the name of Jesus for a whole year. That name has of late been so identified with the frivolous and the incidental that it has lost its power and appeal. I wonder. Can a name be used too often? Can a book be too available?

NEGLECT Another part of the problem has to do with neglect. In the interest of being contemporary we tend to read anything we can get our hands on - except the Bible. I'm not talking about those in the land who never pledged a love for the book. I'm talking here to you - to the men and women within the family of Biblical faith. Remember - the book of Deuteronomy was lost inside the temple.

We're addicted to fads. Let some book come out that gives us a new twist on mental hygiene, and we make it one of the Top Ten. We do the same with a new paperback that deals with the value of introspection or meditation - as though introspection and meditation were something new. Some new theory regarding diet, or dreams, or sleep, or sex. Some new evaluation of the occult. Such books we rush out to buy. Our jittery lives attest our propensity for the novel. Meanwhile, that book that deals comprehensively with the deepest questions that man has ever wrestled with, that speaks to all of the ultimate concerns of life goes by - respected, yes - but unread!

Abraham Heschel, of sainted memory, one of the truly great spirits of this century, a man who taught over at the Jewish Theological Seminary so effectively for so long, once said that those who sincerely desire wisdom should stay away from best sellers. On any given day this mystic-scholar could have been shamed by questions having to do with the latest books. But mind you - when a voice was needed that was in touch with the depths of human life, his was the voice that was often sought.

Do not be put off by the folksiness of the distribution of this book to the boys and girls today. It is no indulgence for children. I believe that a nation

can hear this word and repent. A congregation can hear it and become alive, a healing and helping fellowship. An individual can hear it and never be the same again. When this word reaches us, it comes to us colored by our own history, our own tradition, our own background. But you will know it nonetheless by its power. Its power to settle and unsettle, its power to hurt and to heal, its power to destroy and quicken, its power to judge and pardon, its power to put you down and pick you up.

This book, to use the vernacular, will burn a hole in your grid, but it will also flood your heart with peace, and power. And this - because it points beyond itself, and helps us to understand the will of God.

"I have found the book of the law in the house of the Lord". You may wonder how it all turned out. The reforms that were effected did not last. Assyrian power was on the wane in those years and Babylonian power on the rise. Presently the covenant people were taken into captivity - 586 B. C. But it is the judgement of those who have studied that period that the rediscovery of the Book of Deuteronomy some twenty-five years before is what enabled the Hebrews to maintain their identity throughout their years in Babylonian captivity.

CLOSING I was interested in an observation made not too long ago by the President of Ohio State University, Dr. Enarson, in addressing himself to the subject of planning. He said, "When one gets down to planning, there are two models to be considered: the Cook's tour model and the Lewis and Clark model. The Cook's tour model defines a precise schedule on a well-defined route; it moves in orderly progression amid known landmarks. The aim is to plan to avoid contingencies; the unexpected is to be avoided; all is scheduled, ordered and routine." That's the Cook's tour model.

"But" said the President of this center of learning, "I prefer the Lewis and Clark model with its sense of adventure as it explores the new frontiers. They envisioned their goal; they assembled the minimum resources, and had the nerve and the courage to take the unexpected in stride. They knew that success depended upon painstaking completion of the smallest of plans - building of campfires, fording of the stream, delicate negotiations with the Indians. Their epic success was a triumph of small, daily success - all within the context of a goal and a clear sense of direction. The Cook's tour provides the illusion of planning in a world of imagined stability. The Lewis and Clark tour is an adventure into the unknown. Can there be any choice for us?"

Blessed are the people who venture into that unknown with the wisdom of the Bible as their guide.

PRAYER God, our Father, Father of all mankind, we thank thee for the treasures of thy word - for a light by which to see, and a way in which to walk. Help us to make a place for Thy word in our lives, and to share it with those who have yet to learn that thou art love.

In the name and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, we pray. Amen