

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

A VERY EARLY BIBLE SOCIETY.

A Sermon

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On behalf of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

“And Hilkiath answered and said to Shaphan the scribe, I have found the book of the law in the house of the LORD. And Hilkiath delivered the book to Shaphan. . . . Then Shaphan the scribe told the king, saying, Hilkiath the priest hath given me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the law, that he rent his clothes.”—2 Chronicles xxxiv. 15, 18, 19.

HILKIAH had found THE BOOK, and it was a more important find than if he had discovered a mine of diamonds, or perpetual motion, or a new world. Oh, that Book, that wonderful Book! Was there ever anything like it under heaven? Well may it be a power when we come to think of what it is,—the Book of the law of the living God! How reverently did he lift it from its hiding-place, remove its dust, and commence to read its title and contents! This particular Book of the law was probably the first five Books of Moses, commonly called the Pentateuch. Some have thought that it was only the Book of Deuteronomy; but it is too late in the day for us to decide with confidence its exact form; we know that it was “a book of the law of the Lord given by Moses” (2 Chron. xxxiv. 14), probably an autograph copy by Moses. Of that we cannot be sure; but whatever hand may have written the letters, what a Book the law of the Lord is! The Old Testament is a light divine which has led multitudes of saints to the Lord’s right hand, and its lustre is not dimmed by the New Testament, but increased thereby. Not one tittle of it has failed, or shall fail; it liveth and abideth for ever. Taking an enlarged view of the law of the Lord to-day, and holding in our hands two Testaments,

both the Old and the New, what a marvellous Book the Bible is! Earth does not contain an equal wonder.

It is a Book which *has God for its Author*; for, though there be many authors, and the Book be divided into many treatises, yet it is all of one as to its innermost authorship, since holy men of old spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. A divine originality runs through it all; marks of the divine mind abound in every portion, and the Holy Spirit still inspires it all, and breathes it into the hearts of believing readers. Matthew and Mark, and Luke and John are here, but we scarcely observe them as compared with the higher light, the light of God which illuminates every page. The Book is saturated with a heavenly life.

What God has written is to be received with the utmost reverence. It is a pity that so many treat this Sacred Volume as they would treat any ordinary book; they sit on the throne of judgment, and sway the sceptre of criticism, as if they would call God himself to their bar. Surely they have never heard in their heart and conscience the sound of that question, "Who art thou that repliest against God?" If God be not its Author, this Book is a gross imposture, and the sooner we treat it as such the better; but if God be its Author, let us bow before it obediently, and accept it as our infallible directory.

As it has God for its Author, so it commends itself to us as inestimably precious because *it has God's mind for its matter*. In this Book of the Lord the chief subject is himself and his ways, and his grace towards us his creatures. Here the Lord does not so much explain his works as his own personal ways, thoughts, and designs to our fallen race; he does not take the pen in hand to explain to us what he has written in the stone book, or to open up to us what he has printed in letters of light in yonder constellations; but to reveal his glorious grace which he has caused to dwell in all its fulness in Christ Jesus our Lord. He has left us to find out what we may of visible things,—a happy and healthful exercise for our minds; but he had something nobler to tell us when he inspired this Book. Herein he has told us his thoughts of man, and of the Man Christ Jesus; his thoughts upon our sin, and the ruin that comes of it; his thoughts as to how we may be saved, and what shall come out of that salvation. The windows of this Book look towards heaven, and truly they are windows of agate,—themselves precious, and giving us a view of still more precious things. Its doors open into eternity, and its gates lead into glory. Every page points to holiness and felicity, and attracts us thereto. Precious Book! I would say of thee what David said of Goliath's sword, "There is none like that; give it me." Thou art marrow and fatness, honey, wines on the lees well refined; yea, manna of angels, and water from the Rock Christ Jesus. Of all soul-medicines thou art the most potent; of all mental dainties thou art the sweetest; and of all spiritual food thou art the most sustaining.

As the Book has God for its Authon, and God's mind for its matter, so does it become invaluable to us because *it is directed to us*. It is not a letter written from God to the angels, nor is it sent to a race of beings alien from ourselves; but this Book is for men, and it is directed, not to our curiosity, nor to any of our lower faculties, but to the soul of our life, to the vital spirit of our manhood. It is God's Word to the innermost man,—to our immortal part. He speaks here not only to our ears, but to our souls. He directs his teaching not to that part of us which shall die, but to that part of us which shall never cease to be, but shall be immortal as himself. If ever a man ought to concentrate all his faculties, and pray to be in the best mental order, it should be when he comes to study the Word of God upon matters which concern his noblest being. God grant, therefore, that in our hearts we may feel deep reverence for this marvellous Book which we shall not now lose as Israel almost lost it,—whose copies will never become scarce, as they were in Josiah's day. The Word of the Lord will always be precious, but not through scarcity of copies now that the Bible Society is scattering them thick as autumn leaves. They will be always gems for value, and yet as pebbles of the brook for multitude.

He that reads this wondrous Book aright may well value it *because of the boons which it will bring him*. It will tell him how to be rid of all his sin, and free from the slavery of Satan. It will teach him *how* to bear his present burdens, and quit all needless cares. It will be a guide to him through the maze of life, a pillow for the bed of death. It will give him joy and peace through believing when the thickest troubles shall gather round about him, and it will make him ready for the future world when brightest glories shall shine upon him. Whatever thou needest for time or for eternity, this Book shall either give it to thee, or point thee to him who has it ready to give to thee if thou wilt bend thy knee before him. It is a golden mine of truth, and infinitely more; it is a treasury of blessings and delights, and even them I have not fully described it. It has for thee, O sheep of the Lord, all that thy good Shepherd sees that thou hast need of! Here are the green pastures wherein he maketh thee to feed and to lie down; and here flow the still waters, whereof if a man drink he shall never thirst, but shall joy and rejoice in God for ever.

I do not wonder that Hilkiah and Shaphan had the same value for the smaller Book which we believers in Christ have for the larger edition of it; for even a fragment of it is priceless. I do not wonder that they considered their treasure to be worthy of being brought before the king. If they had discovered where hidden coffers had been concealed by Solomon and the great kings that succeeded him, they would not have procured so glorious a present for the king of Judah as when they suddenly stumbled upon this Book of the law of the Lord.

I. To-night I shall try to speak of the whole question under three

heads. And the first will be this: here is an instance of that PECULIAR PRESERVATION which God has extended to the Scriptures which he has inspired. It would seem, from this narrative, that copies of the Word of God had become extremely rare, for no other copy was known to exist. If anyone had known where there was a copy of the Pentateuch, the priest would have known, or the pious king's secretary would have been informed of it. These appear to have been gracious men, learned men, and men to whom the people came; surely, if such a thing was procurable, they would have possessed a copy of the law of the Lord. Perhaps the faithful scattered up and down through Israel and Judah had copies of the Book, but they had grown so accustomed to conceal them from their persecutors that they kept the secret to themselves. If there were other copies, they were not known to those who had the best means of discovering them.

When Hilkiah discovered this copy of the Word of God, he was greatly surprised and overjoyed. What a singular providence it was that the Book was not quite destroyed! How fortunate that the one copy should have been left! It is believed by many—and I think that their belief is correct,—that this was the standard copy. If it was not the original, yet it was an authorized transcript which was to be regarded as the correct text; and it had been laid up in the ark of the Lord for that purpose. Perhaps, in some dark hour, for fear that it should be discovered even in the secret shrine of the tabernacle, a priest had hidden it away. The tradition is that it was buried beneath a heap of stones when Ahaz was seeking out copies of the Word to destroy them. By the divine providence of God, this one standard copy had been preserved, and now came to light. It may have been hidden carefully: then providence had provided the care-taker. It may have been thrown away carelessly: then providence had made even that carelessness to be the means of preserving the treasure. In any case, the law was still among men, and it had now fallen into careful and reverent hands. The God who gave it had preserved it.

Now look you along through all the ages, and if you are a reverent believer in the Word, you will be filled with grateful wonder that the Sacred Roll has been preserved to us. Through what perils it has passed, and yet, as I believe, there is not a chapter of it lost; nay, nor a verse of any chapter. The misreadings of the copies are really so inconsiderable, and are so happily corrected by other manuscripts, that our Bible is a marvel in literature for the comparative ease with which the correct text is discoverable. It seems to me that God's divine care has extended itself to the whole text, so that, with far less care than would be needed by any classic author, the very words of the Holy Spirit may be known. As the wings of cherubim overshadowed the mercy-seat, so do the wings of providence protect the Book of the Lord. As Michael guarded the body of Moses, so does a divine care secure the Books of Moses. I invite lovers of history and of

famous books to look into the interesting story of the immortality of Scripture. Let us think of that special preservation with reverent gratitude.

The God of Israel had given rules for the preservation of the Scriptures, but they had evidently fallen into disuse. It is expressly laid down in the Book of Deuteronomy that each king was to copy out the Book of the law for himself. We have no evidence that any one of them did so. Most of the ordinances of the Lord to his chosen people were neglected almost as soon as they were given. Even in the wilderness, during forty years, the rite of circumcision, which lay at the base of everything, was unobserved. The feast of tabernacles was not kept for many and many a year; and the Passover, the most solemn of all rites, was not carefully celebrated; indeed, it had never been properly observed from the days of Samuel to the days of Josiah. It had been altered and debased from its original form. Alas! Christian ordinances have suffered from the same tendency to change. This proves the depraved nature of man, and his unwillingness to walk in the path of obedience. The plan of preserving the Sacred Book by the kings copying it had fallen into disuse, and hence the extreme scarcity of manuscripts around the court; yet even then the Word did not fail.

Nor was the Scripture alone in danger from the neglect to preserve it, but furious persecutions had been raised against the Holy Volume. The haters of it slew the prophets, broke down the memorials of God's goodness to his people, and polluted the holy place of the Most High; and their rage did not spare his statutes. The law must be destroyed, or they would be still rebuked. You know, brethren, how from century to century that church which has no foundation in the Word of God has, with desperate determination, hunted after every copy of the inspired Volume to destroy it. It is not very long ago since that unchangeable church called the Scriptures "dangerous pastures." Who and what must the shepherds be who use such language concerning the law of the Lord? But with all their burnings they have not destroyed the Book. With all their inquisitions and torture-chambers, faith in Scripture has survived. Still the Book teaches and preaches with a divine unction and authority. What Popery could not do, infidelity shall not do. Infidelity, some years ago, was going to blot out the name of Jesus from under heaven! Its boastful champion said that he was but one man, but in a few years he would undo all that was accomplished by the twelve apostles. His name is left to execration: the work of God goes on better than ever it did; and the grand old Book is scattered everywhere, falling fast and thick as snowflakes in the time of winter. I might almost say that the copies of the Bible are in number comparable to the sands of the sea. Think of nearly a million penny Testaments being scattered in a single year in this one land! These are leaves of the tree of life for the healing of the nations. There is a blessing

in every line of the Sacred Record both for the present age and for years to come. This Word must abide among men till time shall be no more. God be thanked for it.

The passage before us is a very beautiful instance of how under every difficulty, when every regulation has been neglected, and the utmost fury goes forth against the Word, yet the Word liveth and abideth for ever. The fact is, that providence is the ally of revelation. From the Word of the Lord creation started; by the Word of the Lord creation is sustained; and everything seems to know the source from which it came, and every creature lends itself to the preservation of that grand Word by which it exists. Depend upon it, brethren, the Book is not alone; God is always with it. God hath put a wall of fire around the revelation of his will, and with omnipotence he guardeth it against all who would harm it. God is always with those who tremble at his Word; and when there shall come times of darkness and of sorrow, and ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars, never question what the end will be; for "the Word of the Lord endureth for ever." He that sitteth on the floods as King for ever and ever will so order all things that his Word shall have yet greater sway, and his gospel shall conquer the hearts of men.

But, oh, how should we love the Book, and how should we stand up for it, and guard it jealously, since God has guarded it so well! Let every man of God be like Solomon's valiant men of Israel, who watched about the bed of the king, each man with his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night; for there is much fear just now for the truth of God. I mean, of course, to us poor puny beings there is danger; there is no fear in the great heart of the Eternal. There is no fear as to the accomplishment of his purposes; for he is strong in power, and not one faileth. What our fathers preserved with their blood we will preserve with our lives. That which bore them to a martyr's death, singing as they went, we will not consent to throw away. If any man has another gospel, let him keep it; I am satisfied with mine. If any man has found another Bible, let him read it; I am satisfied with my mother's old Bible, and the Bible of my ancestors. If discoveries are to be made concerning a new way of the salvation of men, let them make them who care to do so; the old way has saved me, and the old way has saved multitudes of others; and therein shall I abide, God helping me, come what may; and so will you, my brethren, and together we will rejoice that God preserves his Book, and continues to give his Holy Spirit with it. God will uphold the truth that is in this Book; and the men that hold that truth shall be upheld. "For ever, O Lord, thy Word is settled in heaven;" and similar eternal settlements are made for all whose hope is fixed upon that Word.

II. Having glanced at this, I ask you to think for a little upon another point, and that is THE COMMENDABLE COMMUNICATION CONCERNING THIS BOOK. Hilkiah finds it; Hilkiah hands it to the

royal secretary, whose name was Shaphan. Shaphan reads a bit of it, and makes quite sure that it is what it professes to be, and then straightway he goes with it to the king. The king holds a Bible-reading with him; and when the king has read the Sacred Roll himself, he summons all the people, and reads the Book to them. The point is this: if you have found the Word of God, make it known to others. Keep not this honey to yourself.

Hilkiah handed to Shaphan the Book without note or comment. It was the Book with no apocryphal matter rolled up with it. It was the Book of the law of God in its purest state. He who found the Book delighted in it, but he passed it on; and the next passed it on, and the next passed it on, and the next circulated it still farther. All the nation soon heard of what was written in the Book. The handers-on of the Volume do not appear to have tarried long. Hilkiah rejoiced, and said to secretary Shaphan, "I have found the Book of the law;" and Shaphan did not delay a month, but went straight away to let the king know; and the king, after he had rent his clothes, and expressed his sorrow for national sin, and enquired at the hand of the Lord's prophetess, published the divine message to the people, and read the law to them. The moral is: continually make known God's Holy Word. If thou hast obtained light, let thy brother light his candle at thy candle. If thou hast seen anything of God, tell thy brother what thou hast seen. Let not God's Book grow mouldy in thine own hand, but pass it on, and let another read what thou hast read to thy salvation and to thy comfort, that he also may be saved and comforted. Let your light shine. Scatter the bread of heaven. Distribute the balm of Gilead.

How can we do this? Well, I believe that it is the duty of every Christian man not only to preach the gospel, and to tell to others of his own experience of it, but also literally to pass on the Book itself. You may possibly make a mistake as to your explanation of it; but you will make no mistake if you give away the Book itself, and pray the Spirit of God himself to explain it to the reader. Money should be spent by each one of us in scattering Bibles. With Testaments at a penny, who would not give Testaments away? With Bibles so cheap as they are, and withal so beautiful to look upon, many of them, who would not think it a good investment frequently to give to the young, to your relatives, to your friends, a copy of the Book? Suit the size of the copy to the person, and so give that your present will be valued. What better marriage gift than a family Bible? What better present for an aged person than one of the large-print Bibles? Oh, what gladness you might give to many a humble cottager by the present of such a Book! I have seen them with their old thumbed Bibles, trying to read them when they have strained their eyes, and I have pitied them. We who are getting old know the luxury of a fine large print. You who have the means should take care that there is not an elderly person who, for lack of large type, is unable to read the

Word of God. I hope that few houses are quite without a copy of the Word of God; but, while I hope so, I have often had my hopes very rudely dashed to the ground by discoveries of people who possess no Bible.

I fear also that millions, who possess copies of the Word of God, never think of reading them. I have been at night, not far from here, in the houses of persons thought to be respectable, and there has been death very near; and I have said, "Bring me the Bible, that I may read a passage of Scripture;" and they have hunted high and low, and none has been found. This was not for lack of means to buy, but for lack of care to have. It is for us, at any rate, to endeavour liberally to scatter copies of the Word.

You are doing this when you help the man who spends his life in the work of translation. How can there be Bibles to give away in foreign languages until the Book has been translated into them? The scholar must live while he has the work of translation to do. Subscriptions given to the Bible Society are a handing over of the Scriptures to tribes that sit in darkness, who by this means shall see a great light.

If you cannot give away Bibles, I believe you do a good work when you sell them, or give money to help to produce them cheaply. If you cannot afford a whole Bible, something is done when a portion is given away, or a Gospel is left in a cottage. You can never tell what may come of a single portion of the Word of God,—ay, of a leaf of it. Instead of regretting, as I have heard some do, that Bibles are sometimes sold for waste paper, and goods are done up in them, I am glad that it should be so. I admire the enterprise of Andrew Fuller, and some others long ago, who printed hymns upon papers which were to be used in the sale of cottons and other small wares. They gave those papers to tradesmen that they might do their goods up in them. So long as the truth does but travel, it does not matter how. If you can place the Bible where men may read it, who knows what may result? I knew a friend who, in purchasing his tobacco, found it done up in a passage of the Word of God, and by the perusal of that portion became a converted man. Let us not be afraid of what will become of the Book, for it is quite able to take care of itself; only let us imitate Hilkiah and Shaphan and Josiah, and make it known wherever we have the opportunity. Hast thou bread to eat while the multitudes are dying of hunger in the streets, and wilt thou eat thy morsel alone? Then shame on thee! Is the plague mowing down its thousands, and hast thou medicine that can stay the disease, and dost thou conceal the recipe and hide the remedy in thine own chest? Then shame on thee! Dost thou see millions going down to hell, and hast thou the good news of how they may escape that place of misery, and enter into glory; and wilt thou not tell it, or wilt thou not hand it on in the form of a Book? Then shame upon thee! How is he a Christian who has no sympathy with the Bible Society? How is he a Christian who in some shape or other does not spread this matchless Word?

III. And now, lastly, I want to call your attention to the best thing of the whole; and that is, notice THE IMPORTANT INFLUENCE OF THIS BOOK WHEN IT WAS READ.

We find that, as soon as the king heard the words of the law, *he rent his clothes*. First of all, he read it. The Book has no value if it be not read. Nowadays, we do not so much need Bibles as Bible-readers. Are any of you in that condition,—that you would not be without a Bible in your house, and yet you never read it? Do you treat this Book as a fetich? Do you reverence words which you do not care to read? Is there some kind of witchcraft about paper and binding in a certain form? Do you think it a very pious thing to put a big Bible under your arm, and march to a place of worship with it, and yet never read it? Oh, fall not into such folly! It is the reader and the understander of the Word who gets the blessing from it. This Book is like a nut, and you must crack the nut by reading and meditation, and so get the kernel, or it will not feed your soul.

Now, the first result of this Book upon the king was, that he rent his clothes. How many here present, if they would but read the Word, and if the Holy Ghost would bless it to them, would have to rend their hearts, if not their garments! You, my friend, if you are not born again, if you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, are in such a condition that, if you knew your danger, the joints of your loins would be loosened, and for fearful astonishment you would be ready to fall to the ground. You are in the gall of bitterness, and in the bonds of iniquity, and do not know it. You lie under the wrath of God, and the curse of the law is upon you, and you do not know it; and all for want of reading and believing what this Book would tell you,—would tell you most assuredly and infallibly. I fear me, there never is a congregation without a considerable number who have need to read this Book, if for nothing else, in order that they might know their real state. There is a prayer which I often pray, and I venture to commend it to many here; I pray, “Lord, let me always know the worst of my case.” I cannot bear the idea of being self-deceived, of fancying that I am rich and increased in goods, and have need of nothing, when in God’s sight I am naked, and poor, and miserable. Read your Bibles, that you may be honest with yourselves,—that you may not deceive yourselves by thinking that you are something when you are nothing. That is the first effect of the Word. “Oh!” say you, “it would make me miserable even to read it.” Very likely it would; but by such misery you would come to sure and healthful happiness. By such a disturbance you would come to a lasting and acceptable peace.

After the king had rent his garments, *he then began to enquire after the God who had sent this Book*. Now, notice this. If any of you have never done this, pray that you may read the Book,—ay, read the more terrible parts of it as well as the more cheering portions, in such a way that, having read it, you may seek this God

who thus speaks to you in loving faithfulness. Endeavour to learn of him how you may be saved; labour to know him personally; for it is written, "Acquaint now thyself with God, and be at peace." It is of no avail to be acquainted with the Scriptures if you are not acquainted with God. You may read the Scriptures till you perish, unless you see God in the glass of Scripture; for it is to him that you must come. A personal Christ must have personal dealings with a personal sinner, or else there will be no personal salvation. And the value of the Book lies mainly in this,—that it does not let you stop at itself, but it points as with a finger of light to the cross, and with a still small voice it whispers, "There your hope lies. Look there." The Lord Jesus takes up the cry of the Book, and utters that gracious command, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth." O that you would look and live! Scatter the Bible, Christian people, in order that it may be like a sharp two-edged sword to kill self-righteousness, and that it may also be a finger of love to point sinners to the cross of Christ.

After this happened, and Josiah began to understand the Book, *he entered upon a reformation*. I will not say how many things in England need reformation; but certainly we need it in a great many forms, ecclesiastical, doctrinal, social, moral, and political. The Bible is the greatest of reformers. You thought, perhaps, I should have applied that term to Luther, or Calvin, or Zwingle; but this is the reformer that reformed Luther; this is the teacher that instructed Calvin; this is the prophet that fired the heart of Zwingle. Whilst this Book is extant, error will always be in danger of overthrow. An open Bible, and men may cavil, and criticise, and invent new doctrines if they please; but this is the rock on which they will split. As God lives, his truth must live; and all that is of man's imagining and scheming, and that comes not out of this Book, shall be broken to pieces. The grass withereth, but the Word abideth. "Whosoever shall fall upon that stone shall be broken; but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder." If you seek to have the social fabric purged of the leprosy which now eats into its very walls, scatter this Book. If you want to uplift the fallen, and to purify the defiled, scatter this Book, that men may be cleansed by it. If you want to see the Church of God made one, and her various dividing errors put away, scatter this Book. If you desire to see a blessed unity in the truth, scatter this Book. If you would dispense a perfect blessing, scatter the Bible, for all good lies here. We need no novel teachings to restore the glory of the Church; we only need to come back to the purity of Scripture. That great reformation which broke down all the idols in Judah and Israel came of the discovery of this Book; and there remains for us at this day no better means of reform and revival. God send to England this choice mercy, that it may become a Bible-reading nation, a Bible-loving nation, a Bible-obeying nation; and that shall be the best thing that can happen to our native land. God grant it!