

THE REASON FOR OUR HOPE

by

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CHAPTER SIX

A BAFFLING BOOK

O Word of God incarnate!
O Wisdom from on high!
O Truth unchanged, unchanging,
O Light of our dark sky;
We praise Thee for the radiance
That from Thy hallowed page,
A lantern to our footsteps
Shines on from age to age.

— W. W. How

PERHAPS YOUR CONCEPTION of the Bible is very different from that of the poet. Perhaps to you, as to Harry Elmer Barnes, the noted historian, it is “a purely secular product of human ingenuity.” Although that may be your conception of the Bible, there is one thing about it to which, I am sure, you will agree: the Bible occupies a unique place among all the millions of other books that constitute the world’s literature. Let us consider, then, a few of the strange and significant features of this collection of ancient Jewish writings.

Consider, first, how extraordinary it is that this collection of ancient Jewish history, poetry and prophecy has lived on for thousands of years. That in itself is a very strange and significant fact.

Centuries have slowly ticked away since the Bible was written; a score or so of powerful civilizations have flourished, decayed, and vanished, leaving scarcely a trace of their existence; war and fire and human negligence have wiped out the records of antiquity to so large an extent that the books of such nations of antiquity as the Phoenicians and the Hittites and the Cretans are lost to us. And yet for some unaccountable reason these ancient writings of the Hebrews have survived, although by all the laws of probability they likewise should have perished.

So perhaps, after all, there is something to what the Bible says when it declares in reference to itself,

“The grass withereth and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth forever” (I Peter 1:24, 25).

Century follows century—There it stands.
Empires rise and fall and are forgotten—There it stands.
Dynasty succeeds dynasty—There it stands.
Kings are crowned and uncrowned—There it stands.
Despised and torn to pieces—There it stands.
Storms of hate swirl about it—There it stands.
Agnostics smile cynically—There it stands.
Profane, prayerless punsters caricature it—There it stands.
Unbelief abandons it—There it stands.
Thunderbolts of wrath smite it—There it stands.
The flames are kindled about it—There it stands.
The arrows of hate are discharged against it—There it stands.
Radicalism rants and raves against it—There it stands.
Fogs of sophistry conceal it temporarily—There it stands.
The tooth of time gnaws, but makes no dent—There it stands.
Modernism tries to explain it away—There it stands.
An anvil that has broken a million hammers—There it stands.

— A. Z. Conrad

What is there, then, about this ancient Book which has not only enabled it to live on through centuries of change and decay but which has also enabled it to live on in spite of untiring and powerful attempts to destroy it? As Theodore Watts Dunton, one of the penetrating critics of our time, puts it:

“A great living savant has characterized the Bible as “a collection of the rude imaginings of Syria,” “the worn-out old bottle of Judaism into which the generous new wine of science is being poured.” The great savant was mad when he said so. The “new wine” of science is a generous vintage, undoubtedly, and deserves all the respect it gets from us; so do those who make it and serve it out; they have so much intelligence; they are so honest and fearless. But whatever may become of their wine in a few years, when the wine-dealers shall have passed away, when the savant is forgotten as any stargazer of Chaldea—the “old bottle” is going to be older yet—the Bible is going to be eternal.”

Why is it that nearly one billion Bibles have been circulated since in 1448 Johann Gutenberg of Germany turned out the first printed copy of Scripture? Why has this Book, produced in a remote corner of the Orient, been translated out of its “dead” languages into more than one thousand living tongues and dialects? And why is it that, unlike the classics, it is studied and treasured and loved not only by scholars but by multitudes of common folk in every circumstance and station of life?

Why is it that, when in 1881 the revision of the New Testament was about to be issued, wealthy men offered five thousand dollars to secure one in advance; and as Dr. William Biederwolf relates,

“On the morning it was published the streets of New York City were blockaded with scores of express wagons waiting for copies of the Book which infidels had exploded and refuted and killed and buried so many years before”?

Why is it that Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek and his wife regard it as a necessity to rise daily at 5:30 to peruse this ancient Book before busying themselves with their staggering responsibilities? Why is it that, when Henry Stanley journeyed into the tangled forest of Africa to find David Livingstone, he started out with one hundred-eighty pounds of books, but as hunger and illness forced the sacrifice of unessentials he discarded volume after volume until all he had left was an edition of Shakespeare, a copy of Carlyle, two treatises on navigation, and the Bible; and concerning these five books he said on his return to the United States, “Poor Shakespeare was afterwards burned up; Carlyle and the navigation books were abandoned by the way, and I had only the Bible left”? And during that expedition, mind you, he read his Bible through three times; and here is how he, a sophisticated man of the world, describes what that reading did to him and for him.

“During my first attack of African fever, I took up the Bible to while away tedious hours. I read Job, and then the Psalms. The Bible, with its noble and simple language, I continued to read with a higher and truer understanding than I had ever before conceived. Its powerful verses had a different meaning, a more penetrative influence, in the silence of the wilds. I came to feel a strange glow while absorbed in its pages, and a charm peculiarly appropriate to the deep melancholy of African scenery. When I laid down the book, the mind commenced to feed upon what memory suggested. Then rose the ghosts of bygone yearnings, haunting every cranny of the brain with numbers of baffled hopes and unfulfilled aspirations . . . Alone in my tent, I flung myself on my knees, and poured out my soul utterly in secret prayer to Him from whom I had been so long estranged; to Him who had led me here mysteriously into Africa, there to reveal Himself, and His will. I became then inspired with fresh desire to serve Him to the utmost, that same desire which in early days in New Orleans filled me each morning, and sent me joyfully skipping to my work.”

Why is it that Captain Paul Riggs, after drifting alone on the Pacific Ocean for one hundred fifteen days, bore this testimony: “I read the Bible through twice. I had a few novels with me but didn’t touch them. The Bible kept me sane”?

Why is it that Dr. Charles Eliot, one of the most learned men of recent times, as he lay dying in his ninety-second year, read the Old Testament again for the last of a score of times; and, when one morning his daughter asked him what he was doing, exclaimed, “I am reading news!”?

Why is it that Dr. Howard A. Kelly, professor of gynecology at Johns Hopkins University, a scientist of international repute, made it his practice never to read anything but the Bible every day after supper?

Why is it that an industrial wizard like Henry Ford always carried a portion of this ancient Book with him, and why is it that, when celebrating his birthday on July 30, he stated to the newspaper reporters who interviewed him,

“The Bible does not need advertising by me, but I wish more people could be persuaded to read the Bible”?

What is there, then, about this Book, I ask once more, which endows it with a perennial appeal and a universal fascination? Say what you will, the Bible is certainly very extraordinary.

And, in addition, consider how this collection of ancient writings is venerated and respected even today by outstanding thinkers. How strange it is that the Hebrews, considered by many as superstitious, should have produced the Book which continues to be the moral standard and guide for the modern world! What a significant fact that is! So President Faunce of Brown University declared:

“Not one of you would think of looking in a book of medicine which was published fifty years ago; not one of you would think of using a compendium of science fifty years old; not one of you would think of taking as authoritative the statements in a book on psychology that was even twenty years old. Mr. Wells’ *Outline of History* had to be revised even before it was published. Here is a Book which remains the standard guide of the world after all these centuries.”

So, too, Admiral Alfred T. Mahan in an address to the cadets at West Point affirmed:

“After much experience of bad and good, of religion and irreligion, I assure you with the full force of the conviction of a lifetime, that to one who has mastered the Word of God, even imperfectly, it brings a light, a motive, a strength, and a support which nothing else does.”

So, also, author Charles Dickens, when his youngest son was leaving home to join a brother in Australia, said to him in a letter:

“I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child. Because it is the best book that ever was, or will be, known in the world; and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature, who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty, can possibly be guided. As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am now writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this Book, putting aside the interpretations and inventions of man.”

Now what is there about this very ancient Book, produced by a “superstitious” race, which makes it the moral guide and standard for the modern world? Say what you will about the Bible, it is certainly very extraordinary.

Indeed, this Book is so extraordinary that it is the one Book which you simply cannot afford to neglect. If you do, the time may come when you will lament as Patrick Henry did on his deathbed:

“Here is a Book worth more than all the others ever printed; yet it is my misfortune never to have found time to read it. It is now too late. I trust in the mercy of God.”

Why not begin to read this extraordinary Book today? Do not gullibly accept the negations and sneers of unbelief but see for yourself whether or not this extraordinary Book is what it professes to be, the revelation of the eternal God.

Open your Bible and you will have an experience similar to that of Vido Mati, a student of Barcelona, Spain. Working on a thesis for his doctorate, he ransacked the University library for the writings of Hierro, an obscure Spanish thinker of the eighteenth century who has been generally neglected. After a long search he unearthed a dusty volume of Hierro and in turning the pages came across a document written by the old philosopher in 1741. It was Hierro’s will, bequeathing all his worldly goods to the first man who would study this book which he apparently surmised would be ignored by his unappreciative countrymen. The Spanish courts declared that the will was legal and Vido Mati collected nearly two hundred-fifty thousand dollars.

That ancient and neglected Bible which you have in your possession contains an even more priceless will than the one discovered by Vido Mati. It contains the title-deeds to eternal life, signed and sealed by the blood of Calvary’s Cross.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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