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No 12.

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AND

HOW

TO READ IT

BY

H. P. BARKER.

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THE BIBLE AND HOW TO READ IT.

A CONVERSATION.

Young Believer : Good evening, Mr.—; I am on my way to a gospel meeting. Will you come along with me?

Higher Critic : Gospel meeting! *You* going to a gospel meeting? I hardly thought that sort of thing was in your line. I was under the impression that you generally spent your evenings at the billiard table.

Y. B. : Until quite recently that was so. But I am glad to tell you that I have been converted, and am now a Christian. I have got something better than billiards.

H. C. : Well, I am glad to hear it. But where is this "gospel meeting" for which you are bound?

Y. B. : In the large tent, which I dare say you have noticed in the field near the market.

H. C. : Oh! that is where you are going, is it? I have heard of those people. Why, they are a most ignorant and antiquated set. They hold the same theories about the Bible that were current fifty years ago. Notwithstanding the march of modern science and the results of higher criticism, they cling to their old-fashioned ideas like limpets to the rocks.

Y. B. : Whatever do you mean? I have been at many of their meetings and never heard any-

thing that struck me as foolish or false. The Scriptures are clearly explained, Christ is preached, and the way of salvation unfolded. They certainly know their Bible well, and base everything they say upon its words.

H. C.: That is just what I mean. Regular Bibliomaniacs, I call them. Worshippers of the Bible! Fancy intelligent men in the twentieth century pinning their faith to a collection of Jewish semi-mythical stories and poems!

Y. B.: I must say I do not like to hear you talk like that. Whatever the Bible may be to others, it has been to me the means of salvation. Through its teaching I have learned that I was a sinner indeed, guilty before God, and helpless to save myself. It has shown me that the work of Jesus was sufficient to secure my pardon, and that in trusting Him I should be safe. The Bible says of such that they "are justified from all things." That is how I know that *I* am justified. I rest upon God's own Word.

H. C.: Oh, but you cannot speak of the Bible as "God's own Word." Modern scholars have clearly shown that Assyrian mythology and Babylonian lore are the sources from which much of it is derived. Besides, there are so many absurdities in it, which stamp it as the product of a superstitious age before the ethics of religion had reached their present stage of development.

Y. B.: I am not sufficiently familiar with the subject to be able to meet your statements. But I shrink instinctively from what you say. I should be sorry to have my faith in God's Word undermined.

H. C.: Well, of course, I don't want to interfere with your faith. Indeed, if it be any comfort

to you, I admit that the Word of God is *in* the Bible.

Y. B. : If that be so, how am I to discover it? Which part is the Word of God and which is not? The criticism that says to-day that Genesis is no part of the Word of God may to-morrow declare the same of John's Gospel. But I see my friend Evangelist coming towards us—the preacher from the tent, you know. Perhaps he will be able to throw some light upon the subject.

Evangelist : Good evening, gentlemen.

Y. B. : Good evening, sir. If you could spare a few minutes I should like to ask you a question or two. This gentleman has been telling me that the Bible is not the Word of God.

E. : Indeed! If it is not God's Word, whose word is it, if you please?

H. C. : Well, in part of it you have the words of Satan recorded. You would not call *that* the Word of God, would you?

E. : To carry your argument to its logical conclusion, you must believe that the Bible is partly the Word of God and partly the word of Satan. So this Book, which has survived centuries of opposition, which has been translated into hundreds of languages, which has had more influence on the history of the human race than any other book, which has been the means of leading untold millions into the paths of righteousness and peace, is partly God's Word and partly Satan's—the joint handiwork of God and the devil!

H. C. : I did not mean that.

E. : Then why use an argument which means nothing if it does not mean that? If the Prime Minister makes a speech in which he quotes the

saying of a political opponent, does that make it any the less true that the speech is the Prime Minister's? And if God, for purposes of His own, is pleased to quote the words of Satan and of wicked and foolish men in His Book, does that fact in any wise vitiate the claim of that Book to be *God's Book*, or *God's Word*?

Y.B. : What about these discoveries of modern theologians?

E. : Did this gentleman refer to them?

Y.B. : Yes; he adduced them in proof of the Bible, in part, having a heathen origin.

E. : All I can say is, that if the gentleman had read a quarter of what others, equally learned, have written with regard to the so-called discoveries, he would be ashamed ever to mention them again.

H.C. : Well, for my part, I don't see the reason for all this fuss about the Bible. Of course, I am willing to profit by its ethical teaching, though even in that connection I do not consider it altogether flawless. I am a twentieth-century man. No antiquated cult for me. God will not condemn us for not pinning our faith to a certain book, so I cannot see that it matters much how we regard the Bible.

E. : I am sorry for the poor dupes of the much vaunted Higher Criticism. How little they know of real joy and power! Depend upon it, depreciation of the Scriptures goes hand in hand with depreciation of *Christ*. And indeed, to belittle His glory under plea of making much of His humanity, is the tendency of Modernism.

Y.B. : I am so glad you met us. You have encouraged me to hold fast to the old Book. I

believe it from cover to cover' and I feel as if I could die for it.

E. : That is right. But remember, it is not enough to believe the Bible, to contend for it, and even to be willing to die for it.

Y. B. : Why, whatever else can be needed ?

E. : Above all, it is necessary to *read* it. Perhaps the enemy's opposition to the Word of God assumes the most successful form when he induces people to believe it, to defend it, to extol it, to preach it, *without reading it*. There are thousands who believe the Bible as you say that you do, from cover to cover. They would shun one who would persuade them to doubt it as they would shun a serpent. Yet they do not read it. Parts of it they have read, and they have heard its leading truths expounded. But they have never read it through carefully and thoughtfully.

Y. B. : But all who are engaged in christian work have to go to it for the subjects of their discourses, their Sunday School lessons, etc.

E. : But the Bible was not given us for this purpose. Cows do not eat grass because they have to give milk ! They eat instinctively, naturally, for their own nourishment, and not in view of any service they may have to render. Bible-believing and Bible-teaching are no substitutes for Bible study. If God's Word is unlike every other book, it resembles all others in one respect : *it is meant to be read*. To pass days and even weeks without a personal reading of the Book we believe to be the Word of God, is perhaps the greatest insult that can be offered to it.

Y. B. : While we are speaking on this subject, I should be glad if you would give me a few hints

as to the best way of studying the Bible. I have not much time that I can call my own, and I want to make the most of what I have.

E. : The great thing is to read your Bible in such a way that it becomes a real pleasure to you, and not a mere task or duty. The only way you can do this is by cultivating personal acquaintance with Christ. A young lady once had a certain book given to her. She read it with some interest and then laid it aside and very nearly forgot all about it. Subsequently she became acquainted with the author of it, and the acquaintance ripened into something deeper, and ultimately they were engaged to be married. Then she took down the book again, and read it with tenfold interest. In the same way, when our souls get to know and love Christ, the Bible ceases to be a mere history, or book of precepts. It becomes a personal message to our hearts from the One we love.

This is the secret of what is called *devotional* reading of the Bible. A lady was once asked by a friend to explain what was meant by "devotional reading." She replied, "Yesterday morning I received a letter from one to whom I have given my heart and devoted my life. I freely confess to you that I have read that letter five times, not because I did not understand it at the first reading, nor because I expected to commend myself to the author by frequent reading of his epistle. It was not with me a question of duty, but simply one of pleasure. I read it because I am devoted to the one who wrote it. To read the Bible with the same motive is to read it devotionally."

Y. B. : I think, by God's grace, I can say I love Christ. I have good reason to love and adore Him. And my reading of the Word is no task

to me. It is a delight. I can quite understand what the lady said to her friend. But my ignorance of Scripture is great. I want to understand it and be well versed in it.

E. : Have patience. With careful and continued study, by the help of the Holy Spirit, that will come. But you will have to plod away at it, and not read in a haphazard kind of way. Have you ever sat in your garden watching the insects sucking the sweet sap of the flowers? There is the gay-winged butterfly, dancing with graceful activity from flower to flower, never stopping long, but darting down here and there to sip a drop of nectar. Another worker in the same field is the brown-vested bee. He does not flutter or hover as the butterfly, but flies straight forward in a determined way, alighting everywhere to find the honey that he wants. If the flower-cup be deep, he goes to the bottom of it; if its dragon-mouth be shut, he thrusts its lips asunder. His rival of the gaudy wing has no patience for such dull details. But what is the end? When October comes, the one dies with the flowers; the other is warm in his hive amid the fragrant stores which he gathered in summer.

Now if your soul is to thrive, you must study the Scriptures like the bee, and not like the butterfly. Your reading must be persevering and not desultory.

Y. B. : Is there any system of Bible study that you would specially recommend?

E. : As long as you have *some* system, it does not matter very particularly what plan you adopt. A well-known preacher tells a story of his early life that may help you. "At that time," he says "I did not know my Bible as I should, the effect

of which was seen both in my own spiritual life and in the character of my preaching. My heart was greatly burdened in prayer about it for more than a year, when God answered me through the lips of a Christian, who described the blessing he had got through reading the Epistle to the Ephesians. I asked him how he had read it. 'One afternoon,' he said, 'I lay down under a tree and read it through. Then I read it again, in the same way, and again and again, as many as twelve or fifteen times; and when I arose to go into the house I was not only in possession of Ephesians, but Ephesians was in possession of me. I at once began the application of this simple principle, beginning at Genesis. I kept at each book till it was mastered before I began work on the next. I cannot tell the effect on me—strengthening my faith in the infallibility of the Bible and deepening my spiritual life.'

You may not, perhaps, be led to study in quite the same way, but it is important to have some definite method of study.

Y. B. : One difficulty with me is that I cannot grasp the meaning of much that I read. Others find help where I find none.

E. : You need the help and teaching of the Holy Spirit in order that what you read may profit you. The ancient Greeks used to send messages from one army to another by means of a roll of parchment, twisted spirally round a staff, and then written on. It was perfectly unintelligible when it fell into the hands of a man that had not a corresponding staff on which to twist it. So with the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is given to you to maintain you in correspondence with the One from whom the

Word comes. By His divine aid alone can you understand and interpret the divine message.

But if we were more simple, and believed that *God means just what He says*, we should find less difficulty in this respect.

“ There are some who believe the Bible,
 And some who believe a part,
 Some who trust with a reservation,
 And some with all their heart ;
 But I know that its every promise
 Is firm and true always ;
 It is tried as the precious silver,
 And it means just what it says.

“ It is strange we trust each other,
 And keep our doubts for the Lord,
 We take the word of mortals,
 And yet distrust His Word ;
 But oh, what a light and glory
 Would shine o'er all our days,
 If we always would remember
 God means just what He says !

Y.B. : Would you advise me to use commentaries and similar books, as aids to the study of the Scriptures ?

E. : Rightly used, you may get much help from the writings of the Lord's servants. But you must let nothing *take the place of* the Bible. The reading of other books, however good, will not nourish your soul like the Word itself.

A strange plant grows in Australia, called the nardoo, bearing seeds which the natives sometimes eat. For the moment these seeds seem to satisfy

hunger, and produce a pleasant feeling, but there is no real nourishment in them. A party of explorers, crossing the central desert of Australia, found themselves without food. Burke, the leader, said, "Here is the plant which the natives use. We need not fear starvation." So day after day they fed on the nardoo seeds. At first they felt satisfied. Presently their strength began to fail and they felt as weak as a baby. Unable to walk, starving for want of nutriment, their flesh wasted from their bones and, powerless to proceed further, they lay down, most of them to die.

All substitutes for the Bible are like nardoo seeds. Nothing can feed and nourish the soul like the pure Word itself.

Y. B. : I hope, in future, to be more diligent and methodical in my study of the Scriptures. I shall get some note books, and analyse the chapters that I read, and classify the various subjects that are dealt with.

E. : Very good ; but there is another danger against which you will have to be on your guard. It is one thing to make a careful study of the Scriptures, and to know a great deal about them, and quite another to be established in the great and wonderful things of which the Scriptures speak. We have known men who have made a life-long study of the Bible ; they can tell you the subject of every chapter ; they know exactly how many times the different names and titles of God are used, and can talk in the most interesting fashion about the wonderful structure of the Book. Yet they seem pitifully ignorant of some of God's great things, which the Bible is given to reveal to us, and in which the Holy Spirit makes us feel at home. On the other hand, we have met men deeply

instructed in the things of God who are by no means careful or systematic students of Scripture.

Yet the Scriptures are the only means that we have of knowing the things of God. They are the divinely inspired account of the revelation that God has given of Himself, His ways and purposes.

Let me use a simple illustration to make clear what I mean. A father, to encourage his son to study the wonderful works of God in nature, presents him with a telescope. The youth, knowing something of the science of optics, is able to appreciate the gift, and devotes a good deal of time to the study of—*the telescope*. He studies its various parts, examines the large lens and the small one, and observes their magnifying power. He gets to know a great deal about the structure of the telescope, and is able to give a most interesting lecture on the subject. He does all this without once having used the instrument for the purpose for which it was given, viz : to study the stars.

Another youth who has a telescope perhaps knows but little about it. He cannot describe its structure, but he has used it to observe the objects in the firmament above, and he can tell you a lot about the heavenly bodies.

Now the Scriptures are like the telescope. They are a wonderful instrument, and, being divinely given, are perfect in their structure and in every other respect. The more they are examined, the more their perfections are seen. But they are given to us of God not merely that we may find wonderful things *in them* but that by their means we may be made conversant with the great things of God ; His love, His purposes,

all that He would have us make the home of our souls in, even now.

The Jews who sought to kill Christ imagined that they had eternal life in the Scriptures. (John v. 39). It was a delusion. What we have in the Scriptures is divinely inspired information as to eternal life—the very words are spirit and life—but eternal life itself is not in the Scriptures but in the Son of God, and it would be ours in Him through faith even if we had never seen a Bible, or if we lived in a country into whose language no word of Scripture has been translated.

The blessing and the knowledge of the blessing are two different things. The blessing, whether eternal life or anything else, is ours in Christ; the *knowledge of it* comes through the Scriptures.

Do not, we beseech you, make the disastrous mistake of thinking that you are enjoying or appropriating the blessing, simply because you have studied the subject as the Scriptures present it.

Examine and admire the telescope, by all means. But do not forget that you miss the object of the instrument unless by its means you examine and admire objects outside it! For this we are dependent upon the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is He who, by His work within our souls, gives us the spiritual vision which enables us to make good use of our wonderful Telescope.

H. P. BARKER.



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