

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Bible Today: Its contents

Earlier this year I was at the funeral of a man I had known for over thirty years. He was nearly ninety years old so there was much that could be celebrated as we looked back over his lifetime. What disturbed me, however, in the midst of the service, were some words of the minister who was officiating. About half way through, when the order of service called for a Bible reading, he dispensed with it saying that, in his opinion, the Bible was largely incomprehensible, so he would read a poem instead! Granted that many present were not believers, or much given to attendance at a place of worship, yet it still seemed very strange to me that a Christian minister, with all the responsibilities that such a calling brings, should dismiss the Bible in such a cavalier fashion.

That the Bible is a closed book to many living in England today is obvious, but one does not expect it to be set aside by one whose duty it ought to be to expound the truth that the Bible contains. At the very least, the Bible deserves to be taken seriously because of its antiquity and honoured place amongst the holy books of the world's religions. Most Christians believe that it is far more than this, understanding that it is an account of the supernatural revelation of God, and the reality and implications of that revelation for the people on planet earth. This series of talks, which began last week, seeks to highlight the contents and structure of the Bible; to emphasise the necessity of looking carefully at what it has to say so that the authority of the Scriptures would find an acknowledgement in the life of every believer.

From this introduction you might have realised that the subject of this morning's study is the Bible's contents, a topic which would lend itself to a much more detailed treatment than we have time for today. Consequently I wish to highlight just a few themes which suggest to us something of the depths of this remarkable book.

If we look at the Bible in a technical way, we see it is a library of 66 books: 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. From a cursory glance at these, it is obvious that there are different classes of literature to contend with. Poetry, history, sermons, biography, prophecy and letters are just some of the types. This morning though, we are not concerned with the technical structure of the Bible for, at Truth for Today, we believe that the whole of this book is the revealed Word of God to every age. Consequently we shall be considering it in that light. Without a doubt, one aspect of the Bible's contents is the way it reveals God in the history of a people and nation and it is around that theme that I wish to introduce our consideration of the sacred scriptures. If we take a wide sweep through the Bible, I think it will be plain that there is a progressive revelation of God.

Genesis, the first book in the Bible, brings to us the dynamic power of the Creator God. Its opening words present us with the full scope of the act of creation, a creation that is without limit or boundaries. Let us read the words as they are in the Authorised Version of the Bible. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." From this one verse we see the self existing, uncreated God bringing the universe into existence. From then on, the account is concerned with the earth and the people who live upon it.

We now quickly move on to consider a figure in Scripture, whom some other religions revere, and through him we shall see that, in the midst of idol worship, the God of the Bible is revealed as immortal and invisible. The figure I am talking about is Abraham, a patriarch of the Jews. We read about him in the middle chapters of Genesis. He leaves the land where he is dwelling for a country to which he was convinced God was leading him. He could not see that God, but by faith he obeyed. However dimly, Abraham understood that God could be known by faith alone. This one man stands before us as the father of all them that believe.

If we take another of the great personalities of the Bible, we shall see that he teaches us that God is an ethical God, with standards of conduct for His people to observe. The man before us now is the great law giver called Moses. He communicated to the Israelites, as they journeyed through the desert, the moral code which has become familiar to us as the Ten Commandments. Most of these are still the moral basis of our society, though increasingly some of them are being challenged in today's world. Yet the fact remains that the God of the Bible is One who demands an ethical response from His children.

If any of you are saying, or thinking, that God is too great and omniscient to be concerned in a personal way with mankind, then that is not what the Bible teaches us. You might have a lofty view of God but not a biblical view, for the Bible makes very clear that God is concerned with us as individuals and with our behaviour.

Moses, about whom we can read in the book of Exodus, also brings before us the great redemptive act of God as He brought His people out of slavery in Egypt. At the same time, a system of worship was put into place with sacrificial offerings and a number of sacred feasts. This would remind us of the majestic holiness of God who dwells in unapproachable light. Without these offerings, the Israelites felt they could not, as a nation, offer unto God the worship which was due unto Him because their sin would always be a barrier between them and a holy God. Thus, we are left with the biblical knowledge that the God who is above and beyond the scope of man has opened up a way in which His creatures can worship Him. This finds its fullest expression in the sacrifice of Christ, but we shall say more of that when we reach the New Testament.

We could also spend time, and spend it with profit, by examining the names for God which are used in the first two books of the Bible, but the time allotted to us does not allow this. Suffice to say that the use of a good concordance or Bible dictionary in a study of these early chapters of the Bible would amply repay the effort involved. From such a study, the heart of the believer leaps in praise to the God who appeared to Abraham in Genesis chapter 21:33 as El Olam, the Everlasting God. As I have said, there are many other titles in these early chapters and I urge you to look at some of them to learn a little more of the God who revealed Himself in the history of His people.

We ought now to continue our brief examination of one aspect of the Bible's contents by considering some of its later chapters. One of the criticisms sometimes made against the Old Testament is that it contains the record of a mere tribal deity. Undoubtedly, some of the figures in the historical books seem to suggest that God was confined to the land of Israel. One of the best examples of this is Naaman whose story is recorded for us in the 2 Kings 5. When Naaman was cured of his leprosy, he asked for several sacks of earth from the banks of the River Jordan to take back to his own country. This was to remind him of the God who had cured him. Such an error in understanding God is a misunderstanding of the God of Scripture. The book of Daniel, amongst many others, tells us of One whose power and dominion is worldwide.

Quickly moving on to end this first section of our study of the contents of the Bible, I want now to look at the New Testament. There is no discrepancy or divergence between the revelation of God in the Old Testament and in the New. We believe that the Old Testament is basically looking forward to the coming of the Messiah-Redeemer, whilst the New Testament identifies Him in the Person of Christ. In both sections, it is the eternal God reaching out to man in grace.

The whole of the last section of the Bible is concerned with the final revelation of God to the people of this world. The Apostle Paul writes of this in 2 Corinthians 5:19 as, "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself"

The completeness of this revelation is made clear in the discussion between the Lord Jesus and Philip, in John 14:8-9. Here, as usual, I am quoting from the Authorised Version of the Bible. "Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us." Jesus saith unto him, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father?" We believe that, knowing God as the Father, is the finality of all revelation. Nothing remains that exceeds the radiance of the Father's glory and love as it is made known to us in Christ, not that we could ever know the fullness of that revelation because such knowledge is beyond the ken of mortal beings. May I emphasise and underline this point, because I am convinced that Christ is the culmination of the revelation of God.

In our brief look at Scripture, as the record of God being revealed through the history of a people, we notice that the first Gospel ends with the presentation of Christ to the people of the world: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world." From such a scripture we can see that the Bible has nothing else left to declare. The revelation of God in Christ is its last word.

I must state, however, that Scripture is more than an account of the revelation of God in a general and historical way. It is the unconditional word of the eternal, creating and redeeming God who entered into the history of erring and fallen humanity, establishing an eternal salvation in the incarnate, crucified and ascended Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, we believe that the Bible has the supreme authority in matters of faith, Christian doctrine and the practice of Christianity. We must now examine the contents of the Bible in that light.

From reading Luke 24 we find that the whole of the Bible is really concerned with the Person of Christ. In Luke's account of the resurrection appearances of the Lord Jesus in verses 25 to 27, He instructs two of His disciples with these words: "Then He said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself."

Thus we see that Jesus is central to the whole of the Bible. Even in the earliest days of the church, Christ was preached as the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. When Philip was speaking to the Ethiopian in chapter 8 of the Acts of the Apostles, he was asked about some verses in the prophecy of Isaiah. In verse 35 it says of Philip that "... [he] opened his mouth, and began at the same Scripture, and preached unto him Jesus". Christians would claim that some of the earliest verses in the Scriptures contain a promise of the coming of a redeemer. This is Genesis 3:15, which speaks of the seed of the woman bruising the serpent's head. We could quote further verses to support the view that Jesus of Nazareth, along with His work and words, is the consummation of all the prophetic scriptures in the Old Testament but time does not allow. It would not, therefore, be out of place to say that Jesus is the pre-eminent theme of all the Scriptures. To explain this point further to those who might be thinking that this is an exaggerated claim, I would suggest that the major idea or subject that occurs again and again in the pages of the Old Testament is the doctrine of the "last things". It is usually referred to as the Day of the Lord or the kingdom age. Time and again the prophets look forward to this being established by the king who would be greater than David.

A typical example would be the words of Isaiah. In Isaiah 61:1 it states, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;" This scripture is the one that the Lord Jesus used in the synagogue at Nazareth, at the start of His ministry, in such a way that it was obvious that He was speaking of Himself. He had come to usher in the Kingdom Age, when the rule of God would be apparent because the signs set out in the words we have quoted from Isaiah were being fulfilled.

The same message was given to the followers of John the Baptist as we can read in Matthew 11:2-5: "Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two disciples, And said unto Him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them". If the idea of the "last days" is one of the main themes that runs throughout the entire Bible, and I suggest that it is, then it is obvious that the Person of Christ dominates the whole of Scripture. He is the One in whom all the promises reside.

I wish now to turn to some of the individual themes which run through Scripture but which are dependent for their validity upon the greatness of Christ and upon the glory and love of God which is revealed in His incarnation. I am thinking of such topics as salvation, redemption, the Church, sin and judgment.

I hesitate to bring truths that speak of the eternal majesty of God into a discussion of the contents of the Bible, as I believe that such considerations should lead us not to discussion only, but to worship. That the revelation of God as the Father, along with Jesus being the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth, is plainly there as we have shown earlier. I say again that such revelation should lead us into adoration and worship and not just a study of the doctrines of a major religion. The Bible is a book which should, through the power of the Holy Spirit, affect our attitudes and behaviour.

One consequence of the uniqueness of the Bible as the word of God is that we take the view that it has an authority in all matters of faith and doctrine, as was said a little earlier. This means that such a statement as Romans 3:23 which says, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" is a statement for all men, for all time. It is something that cannot be altered or changed with the intellectual fashion of the age.

In like manner, what is written in the Romans 10:9 must have the same importance: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." I must emphasise that the contents of the Bible have direct implications for our faith in God. We are convinced that within Scripture God has declared the way of salvation. The wonder is that, through the grace of God, many have chosen to answer the call of God in Christ and to follow Him. Even then the Bible is that which equips us, as empowered of the Spirit, to live as disciples and Christians in this world.

Many years ago, the lady whom I eventually married went to a mission hall where the hymnbook in current use was *Sankey's Sacred Songs and Solos*. Amongst the members of the congregation was an elderly lady who had been remarkably used of the Lord amongst the soldiers of the First World War. Regularly she would request a hymn which, sadly, is not often sung today. I quote the last verse.

*"Lamp for the feet that in by-ways have wandered,
Guide for the youth that would otherwise fall,
Hope for the sinner whose life has been squandered,
Staff for the aged and best book of all."*

It refers, of course, to the Bible and though the words might seem dated to our modern ears there is, I feel, far more validity in its sentiments than the action of the man with whom we started this talk with his rejection of the Bible as incomprehensible. May the Lord grant us to learn of Him as we read His Word. May we also have the spirit of obedience to put into practice those things that are revealed to us in that book, which we revere, and which we call the Bible.

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