

WHY STUDY THE BIBLE?

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I'd like to challenge you to read the Bible. Now I realize of course that is probably not high on your to-do list. In fact, if you're a reader it may not be one of the books you plan to read this year. But I'd still like to challenge you to do it, because I think you would get a great deal from it for all kinds of reasons. You ought to study the Bible because it has such an impact upon our lives, an impact we don't realize.

It takes something like names—you know somebody by the name of Paul or James or John or Abraham or David or Daniel—those are Bible names. They come out of the text of Scriptures. Or if you have some friends who are women, it's amazing how many of them have gotten their names from the Bible: Esther, Sarah, Rebecca—you probably call her Becky—Mary and Martha, Ruth. Now I know those women have gotten their names from their late aunt or their grandmother, but trace it back and you end up in the Bible.

I mean, just on a little thing like names the Bible has had its influence. Or there are ways in which we talk without realizing how much of the Bible we know. Have you ever heard somebody talk about "the handwriting is on the wall"? It usually means there's some dire consequences out ahead. That came from the Bible, one of the corking good stories you find in the Old Testament.

Or you see a beautiful garden and you say, "That's an Eden." Well that's the name of the first garden mentioned in the Bible. Or somebody does a deed for another person and they say, "You know, he was really a good Samaritan." It's strange that we would use that, because I doubt that you've ever bumped into a Samaritan, and what's a good Samaritan? Well it comes from a story Jesus told and that story was so powerful that it's become part of the way we think.

Somebody has said that, "If you really tore the Bible out of all of literature, all of English literature, the literature would fall apart." Again and again there are references to the Bible. So at least one reason you ought to read it is to be an intelligent, well-informed reader or somebody who is perceptive about what's going on in society. But there are better reasons for reading the Bible than the fact that it's had an impact on the culture.

You ought to read it because the Bible is not really a single book. It's like a library; and whatever your taste is in literature, you'll find it in the Bible. For instance, do you like stories? The Bible is filled with them. In fact, the major way that the biblical writers communicate their ideas is through story. Their stories are as exciting as modern novels. There are stories in the Bible about great temptation, the way people fell or the way people stood against it. Stories in the Bible, this holy book, are about betrayal, murder, rape, robbery, adultery, broken families, and the consequences. You read the Bible stories, and you'll be amazed at how relevant and up-to-date they are. Sure times have changed, but people haven't.

Or if you walk through the library of the Bible, you'll find poetry, a lot of poetry. Now the poetry that you read in the Bible isn't exactly like the poetry that we grew up with. At least the poetry I knew as a youngster was rhymes: "Mary had a little lamb, it's feet were full of soot, and everywhere that Mary went, it's sooty foot he put," or something like that. Well that's not what we mean by poetry in the Bible.

Poetry in the Bible deals with images and deals with emotions, the kind of experience that you've had. There's a book right in the middle of the Bible filled with poetry. We call it Psalms. It's really a book of ancient hymns or poetry. Wherever you turn in that collection of Psalms, there's something that will reflect your experience. Some of those poems are rich and exciting. The poet is trying to get hold of a feeling of upbeat-ness and triumph. Other poems deal with depression and questions.

Some of those poems deal with a man who feels that he may have lost his faith. He's hanging onto it by his fingertips. And then there are other poems that are poems of a quiet confidence. In this collection of poems we call the Psalms, the 23rd poem, the 23rd Psalm, is one that people who don't even read the Bible may know. David, the greatest king that Israel ever had, sat down to write, and he said, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." When David wrote that psalm, he was thinking of God as a Shepherd, but more interesting he was thinking of himself as a sheep.

Now think about that. I don't know of any king who would want to be represented by a sheep. Kings like the image of a lion or a tiger, an eagle, even a vulture. But a sheep, so defenseless, so dependent, everything a great king wouldn't want to be. And yet in that poem with that image he writes as a sheep about his shepherd. And that's how you can understand the psalm.

He says, "I shall not want, He makes me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me besides still waters." He's not talking about a picnic; he's talking about the way a sheep is provided for by its shepherd. He takes it to places of plenty and places of refreshment. All of that is to say that one kind of literature you have is story, but the other kind is poetry.

Or there is another kind of a story in the Bible, we call them parables. Jesus told them. It takes a great deal of genius to be able to construct a parable. A parable is a story that lies alongside the truth, and you have to think about the parable, and then you have to think about the truth and see what the relationship is.

One parable Jesus told is called the parable of the prodigal son. Robert Bridges, a Unitarian and a literary critic, said that, "This is an absolutely flawless piece of work." Rudyard Kipling said, "It's the greatest short story ever written." You can see why. It's a story that could take place in your neighborhood. I mean on your street. Maybe even in your home. It's about a kid who had everything—good home, good parents—but he wouldn't settle for that. He didn't want just a room of his own; he wanted a life of his own. And so he takes off to go to the far country. You've known people like that haven't you? And well there it is in Jesus' story. And because we can identify with it, we can understand what Jesus is saying.

And so the Bible is a book of different kinds of literature. Whatever you like in literature, you'll find in the Bible. But there's something else. Not only has the Bible woven its way into the fabric of our thought, not only is it a book of different kinds of literature, but even more important, the Bible helps us understand what we would not understand by ourselves.

Have you even wondered about life, about the mess we're in? The Bible deals with that mess. It opens with a creation in which God says of His creation, "It's good." In fact, He says it over and over again. "Yeah, that's good." And then when He makes men and women, He says, "Oh, that's very good." Only two, three pages later, everything goes wrong, and within four pages of the beginning you've got a young man who murders his brother, and the rest of the Bible carries that out.

Have you ever wondered how we got into the mess we're in? For example, I think everybody wants peace. I don't know any leader who doesn't say he wants peace. Everybody wants peace, wants to bring peace. But, for less than 50 years in all of recorded history, we have not had wars in which people killed each other, maimed each other.

Ever wonder: If everybody is so insistent that they want peace, why don't we have it? The Bible deals with that. The Bible tells us how we went wrong, and even more important, it tells us how we can be made right. I don't know who you are, but I suspect that you sense in yourself an incompleteness. There are things you have done that nobody else may know about, but you know about them and you wonder sometimes, if you had to stand before God and give an account for the living of your days, how would you do it? All kinds of people have wondered that.

The Bible answers that question. The Bible tells you not only about the mess we're in, or the mess you're in personally, or I'm in, it tells us how in spite of that mess we can have a relationship with the eternal God. Think of it, by the reading of this book and understanding what it's teaching, you can be joined to the timeless life of God.

Since that is true, I think you'd want to read this book, because it promises not only a good life here, it promises eternal life in the ages to come. At any rate, those are some reasons for reading this book, the Bible. And we'd like to help you with it. There are things about the Bible that can be difficult. I mean, it was written 2,000, 3,000 years ago, and even though you know the land in which it was written, Israel and what we call Iraq today, you know the map will be the same. Maps don't change.

But there are places that were called one thing then, called another thing now, so we want to help you with that just to bring it up-to-date so that you don't have to wonder about strange names or strange places. We'll do our best to sit beside you, try to anticipate your questions and get you into the glorious experience of reading the greatest book that was ever written, the Bible.