

The Nation's Greatest Need

by the BISHOP OF DURHAM

WE speak of the reinstatement of the Bible in its true and proper place as the Book of God to man, and I suppose we must do it with a certain amount of reserve. I think we sometimes a little exaggerate in imagination the extent to which, even in the best days of the past, the Bible was ever quite the Book of the people, partly because, in days not so very far distant, the reading power of the nation was not nearly what it is now. Certainly toward the close of the eighteenth century many a devoted preacher of the Gospel had to make his message as plain as possible to people who he knew, as to the majority of them, could not read. That comes out in the Life of Venn, of Huddersfield and Yelling, one of the greatest preachers of the Gospel in the end of the eighteenth century, where in his parish, the parish in which he ended his days in rural Cambridgeshire, he had to speak to a population of shepherds and their families, the large majority of whom could not read, and, therefore, of course, were not people of the Bible in their personal life.

I was reading very recently some pages of Sir Walter Besant's account of London and its life in the first half of the eighteenth century, and it struck me, to an extent we hardly realize, how the present was anticipated to an extraordinary degree in some evil ways. Outrageous Sabbath desecration is not so modern a thing as it sometimes seems. George the Second's reign saw contempt of the Sabbath almost as flagrant as the reign of George the Fifth.

Still, we know that there has been undoubtedly a great passing of the Bible out of common knowledge, and of the influence which some reverent familiarity with the Book is so sure upon the whole and as a rule to bring. The intense desire of the promoters of the Bible Crusade is, as they put it, to get hold of that all-important person, "the man in the street," and especially the man in the workshop, and to go to the innumerable grades, classes and interlacing circles of our social and national life with this wonderful thing, the Bible, made real and influential upon them.

We want, I think, for ourselves, a great revival of the consciousness of the supernaturalness of the Bible. The tendency of our time has been—often for excellent ends and results, but not always—to lay a tremendous stress upon the naturalness of the Bible, until sometimes those researchings and teachings have too much taken the line of the naturalism of the Bible, i.e., it has been too often treated practically as though it were a Book whose genesis, whose origin, could be as completely explained naturalistically as, for example, the literature of the classics or the literature of this country can be explained, no doubt not without mystery (for every action of the human mind *habet in mysterium*), but still without any recognizable direction of the Spirit of God, so failing to carry His authority with it.

THE BOOK OF GOD'S AUTHORITY.

The all-important point about the naturalistic view of the Bible is that you cannot possibly to a naturalistic view of the Bible attach a Divine authority, and the all-important thing about the Bible, if we would be of the mind of Christ about it, is that it should be for us, in a sense, as reasonable as it is spiritual, but profoundly the Book of the authority of a revealing God.

That it is supernatural seems to me always to be to the common mind capable of being at least practically and reasonably set forth by the reminder of the simplest fact, namely, its manifoldness and its oneness. The more you think of it, there is nothing in literature like this wonderful volume, a volume small enough to be printed quite legibly and put easily into a pocket, almost a waistcoat pocket, and yet which is so

manifold in time, in the circumstances of production, in a thousand other ways, that it is unique; a literature which has extended, on the most moderate estimate, for a thousand years in its production. If we could imagine a production in English as sporadically produced as the Bible, its earliest fragments dating from Alfred and its latest from Victoria, and should realize that it was in its style, its occasions, and the character of its writers as miscellaneous a thing as could be imagined, and yet that that miscellaneous English book should appeal to the common heart as a personal friend, should speak the language all through ultimately of one mind and one outlook, I think we should say that that book was a miracle in literature in the strictest sense; and precisely that is the Bible which we are concerned with to-day. On the most moderate estimate, it is the production of a millennium, and yet the human heart, alike in the oldest and most civilized of countries and the least evangelized tribe in the middle of Africa to which the Bible Society has supplied the Bible in their tongue, realizes it, not with elaborate reasonings, but with the instinctive reply of the heart, as one. That, I take it, stamps the Bible as supernatural, and, therefore, immensely interesting.

SCIENCE AND THE BIBLE.

I could go into detail as to the supernatural in its parts, but one thing has always struck me, and it is the only thing I will mention. Nothing is, perhaps, more common at the present day than to treat the first pages of the Bible as little better than a glorified folklore. I can never forget what was said to a dear friend of mine, whose report will be infallibly accurate, by a young Agnostic medical man about fifteen years ago. In the course of conversation my friend and he found themselves exchanging thought pretty freely, and Science and the Bible were mentioned. This rather typical, very modern, and avowedly Agnostic young doctor, a very able fellow, said, quite in passing, "Of course, the Evolution of Gen. 1 is all right." Those words struck me as of far-reaching consequence, for, supposing the latest theory of the most audacious critic of the date of the production of Gen. 1 to be right, we will carry down below his estimate, and say it was only just before the Christian era. Think of a production professing to give an account of the order and ordering of the world for man's abode written then; imagine it to be found as an accidental result to correspond broadly with the science of to-day. Would it not be unthinkable that it should be mere accident? Would there not assuredly be something more than that behind so astonishing a paradox as that ages before the birth—we may say about the middle of the Middle Ages—of anything that can be called modernly scientific, something should be written as to which the most modern and least reverent, perhaps, of critics should say, "Of course, in that sense it is all right"? A great deal more could be said in that direction, at least, to caution us against being too much weighed, weighted and discouraged by the endless talk around us in the naturalistic direction about the Bible.

But one thing is abundantly certain, that if the Bible is to be trusted, it must not only be defensively argued about—it must be known. One of the surest credentials of its supernatural life is that it does so tremendously and wonderfully respond to being known. It is like one's introduction to a man whom you have more than reason to think worthy and trustworthy, but intercourse with whom deepens the impression until it becomes the profoundest conviction of the heart because you are intimate with him, you have got behind into his mind, you have got into touch with his heart; and worth all the mathe-

matical demonstrations or all the formal logic that can be conceived is your certainty that that man can be relied upon because of himself.

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY.

I venture now to say, after a long life's perusal of the Bible, even through times when my faith about it was tremendously shaken—about my undergraduate time, and just after that at Cambridge—that what I think restored my faith in the Bible was not argumentation about it, but conversion to God. When my Lord Christ became a living and unutterably necessary reality to me, I remember one of my first sensations of profound relief was, "He absolutely trusted the Bible, and, though there are things inexplicable and intricate that have puzzled me so much, I am going, not in a blind sense, but reverently, to trust the Book because of Him."

READING THE BIBLE THROUGH.

Following my mother's precepts in early life, I have persevered in reading the Bible through, and then through and through again, which I am doing still. It takes me about two years, and I hope as long as life, or, at all events, as long as brain lasts, to go on doing the same. With the reality that God Himself speaks to me, I do feel a sort of certainty that nothing can get behind that it is constructed to be trusted, and that the Constructor is ultimately the Eternally True manifested in that God Incarnate, one of whose watchwords is, "It is written," a watchword which I pray may be mine to the end.

Once more, humbly, not blindly, nor in the least forgetting that there are things untold in that Book which, like Matthew in the "Pilgrim's Progress," I cannot understand at all, but about which, like Matthew at the feet of Christ, I can say, "God is wiser than I, and He understands"—once more I say this is the Book which we want now to become much more popularly well known, and by every possible means of publicity, because we do think it is immensely important, not only supremely for salvation, but for national life.

I read the Old Testament at night and the New Testament in the morning, and at night lately my reading has got me into Ezekiel. I am profoundly struck in Ezekiel—as, of course, in Jeremiah and Isaiah and in the Minor Prophets, too—with, so to speak, the nationalistic significance of the Bible. I think that during the war, when many have rediscovered their country and her unutterable importance and significance to the common and the individual life, many have found a new eloquence in the Old Testament, because it is commissioned so very specially of the two parts of the Divine Book, to speak to the nation. What strikes me with an awful interest in Ezekiel is, shall I dare to say, the impassioned appeal with which the Almighty Inspirer fills his prophet to let it be known to the nation that obstinate national forgetfulness of God, contempt of His will, unfaithfulness to His covenant, seeking of other gods rather than Him, is, without any reduction from the tremendous reality and literality of it, a high offence against the heart of the Majesty on high. He emphasizes that a nation which in its common life is going down the steep of secularism is losing godly fear, is taking up with an idea of things in which the common man thinks no one is greater than himself, and no sky is much loftier than the ceiling, a nation which is going down that slope, maybe, in other respects as remarkable, as victorious, as successful as possible, but it cannot be living its life under the approval of its maker, who is all the while the Prince of the kings of the earth, while He is the Lord of Hosts.

THE BIBLE'S WORK ON THE NATION.

Therefore, if we would have the Bible do its work on the nation, we do want more or less to let the whole Bible become more or less familiar to the people. The precious Gospels, the wonderful New Testament, God knows the marvels they can do, and have done, wholly apart from the Old Testament, for souls, for families, in a thousand ways. But I take it that the Old

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