

## PASTOR AND PEOPLE.

### THE HOLY SCRIPTURES.

"The Holy Scriptures."—2 Tim. iii. 15.

Having come to this view of the Being who is known by the name of God, my attention was next turned to the Bible, which is said by many persons to be God's Book. I was doubtful about its authorship, for how could any book be written by an invisible Being? I opened its first pages, and found a serpent talking to a woman; I turned to its last pages and found the "old serpent, called the Devil," still living. There I got the surname of the serpent, and that helped my studies not a little. Coming before my notice nakedly and hideously as a *serpent*, I recoiled from the sight, but long afterwards, when "called the Devil," that same serpent was more familiar and intelligible. Yes, at the beginning of the Book I found a talking serpent, and at the end of it many worshipping beasts, four of which had four-and-twenty wings amongst them, and the beasts were full of eyes within, and day and night they said, "Holy holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." A great change this in the line bestial! Beginning with seduction, and ending in worship—something must have happened between.

I paid no heed to the formal announcement made to me by my friends to the effect that the Book was inspired. No two of them exactly agreed as to the full and precise meaning of the term. So I took to the quiet and complete reading of the Book, and as page after page came under my notice the thought suddenly flashed upon me that the Bible is the story of what is actually taking place in the world at this very moment. Its history is not only ancient, it is contemporaneous. At this point my whole thinking about the Bible went up to a higher level. It was no longer a collection of local anecdotes that took place in some romantic way before the formal settlement of history. This is the final and sufficient proof of what is called the inspiration of the Bible, that every line of it has its parallel counterpart in the history that is moving around us. Think of the Bible merely as an ancient Book that can be reached only by traversing many long ages, and that can be expounded only by very learned criticism and archæology, and you put the Book from you and leave it to those who care for antiquarian research. An Eden that bloomed and withered ten thousand years ago would have small interest for me but for the Eden that blooms and withers in every human life, not least in my own. A serpent that talked and tempted some six thousand years ago would simply shock my credulity but for the serpent that lures and mocks my heart every day. The histories, the rebellions, the judgments, the revolutions, and tragedies of the Bible would bewilder me like so many high romances, did they not repeat themselves in every national history. So as I read the Book, most fragmentary and patch-like in its rude structure viewed from the point of literary art, I began to feel that there is only *one* Book in the world, a Book of which all other books are parts, illustrations, proofs, or perversions. It is with this Book as it is with the earth. Many books have been cut out of the one, and many gardens have been cut out of the other. The horticulturist has by many a combination brought even new forms of beauty and fruitfulness into view, and so the skilled reader of the Bible, being all eyes within, and strongly winged with reverence of fancy, is constantly bringing new things out of the ancient Book. Yet "the earth abideth forever," and "the word of the Lord abideth forever;" the newness is an adaptation, but the substance is unchangeable.

#### THE LIVING BIBLE.

You will see, then, that in coming to the Bible I did not put out the eyes of my Reason and send out my Credulity to receive anything that might be offered to it. I read it as a sober rationalist, and it was actually my reason that was convinced and satisfied. The Bible might have been written only yesterday. Man is still being "made," man is still losing the finest chances of his life; Cain is still killing Abel; blood is still crying for blood; thunder and lightning, storm and flood, still fall upon the abominations of the earth; great national trials and great national deliverances are still taking effect; elections to high honour and solemn responsibility are

still appealing to our wonder and challenging our meek acquiescence; and everything else in the Bible repeats itself in our social and imperial experiences. No victory is won that cannot find its sweetest celebration song in the Bible. No king dies whose truest epitaph is not already in the Bible. No sorrow means its piteous tale whose fittest words are not in the pages of the Bible; our holiest curses, our tenderest benedictions, our liveliest hopes, are all best expressed in Bible terms. In the Bible the child is born amidst the singing of angels, in the Bible the old man dies without knowing the bitterness of death; it is a book for home, for the wayside, for the great and wide sea, for the mountain of palaces, and for the valley where the cypress droops and the birds cower with fear. This, and more, this infinitely, I have myself found it to be. This, then, is inspiration. Do not suppose that inspiration is a term that can be defined in the dictionary. Some words ought not to be in the dictionary, as some birds ought never to be in a cage. What dictionary can define love, or hope, or joy, or home? Inspiration must be tested and defined by your own consciousness. The book that touches your deepest life, that knows you, and searches you, and finds words for your thrilled but speechless heart, is inspired and is inspiring. Never attempt to form any theory of inspiration, or any theory of the Atonement. They are too much like life itself ever to be defined or exchanged for smaller terms. You *feel* them: one great rob of the heart tells you that the vision of the Lord is passed before you. Thus, without impairing the literal historical value of the Bible, I felt that its chapters are published anew every morning. Truth is larger than fact, as life is larger than history; so the mere incidents of the Bible are as the very seed of human action, growing and multiplying, and dying and reappearing through the seed-time and harvests of vanishing ages.

Looking at the Bible from this point of view, all difficulties as to its acceptance disappeared, though some difficulties as to its literal interpretation necessarily remained. But if the Bible has to be rejected on the ground of such difficulties, life itself must be, for precisely the same reasons. I myself am a greater mystery to myself than the Bible is to me. I am in the world without my own consent; I dare not go out of the world by the force of my own hand; nor may any man drive me out of the world except at the peril of his own life. I can curse the power that made me, and I can cry to heaven in long and tender prayer. I am a ghastly self-contradiction; my foul feet I can set upon the very glory of the sun, and my strong wings, made for high flight, I can draggle in the mud. Sometimes I could welcome angels into a heart cleansed and holy, and yet whilst they are coming to me I offend them by some sudden and damning pollution. These are the mysteries that affright me! Literal discrepancies and chronological informalities are of small account to me when I see my own torn life and the red blood gushing from the gaping wounds. The Bible did not drop down from heaven. It passed through human services of many kinds, and was tarnished by the channel through which it flowed. It is the same with the force within me which I call life. It is a spark of God's own energy, yet it has clothed itself with dust, and its incarnation has dragged it into many a distress. Thought is troubled by its own incarnation in words; and life is troubled by its incarnation in the half dead body. How can God dwell in a tabernacle of words? How can He adjust Himself to a clothing of indeterminate syllables which may themselves at any moment be turned to new meanings and uses? As I find my manhood in my soul rather than in my body, so I find my inspiration in the total thought of the Bible rather than in the handiwork of the often weary and sometimes inaccurate scribe.

#### THE RIGHT SPIRIT FOR BIBLE STUDY.

Very much depends upon the spirit in which the perusal of the Bible is undertaken. But this is equally true of everything else. The irreverent man spoils whatever he touches. The mocker can force himself to laugh or jibe at the graveside. In no important inquiry or serious difficulty would I consult an irreverent man. His frivolity would pain me. His flippant laugh would jar upon me and have all the effect of a cruel blow. It is not likely, therefore, that the Bible will reveal itself to such a spirit. Reverence is required in the appreciation of the finest music, the highest painting, the sublimest scenery.

These, from my point of view, stand in relation to the Bible as a porch to the palace to which it leads. So I must stipulate for reverence in the case of any man who really wishes to estimate the value of the Bible. The most of the historical Bible can be put into small compass: God created the heavens and the earth, God created man in His own image; man broke God's law and came under penal retribution; man was formed into families and nations; families and nations are marked by infinite variety of individualism, all men have done wrong, all wrong doing has been punished; all punishment ends in destruction, unless some saving power be interposed from the offended and dishonoured side. I accept that as the best summary of human history, and it is the summary of the Bible. If there is any better summary—*produce it!* It gives you God, Creation, Humanity, Law, and Destiny. Under these terms all other necessary terms may be brought, as every form of existence is covered by the universal dominion of *Life*.

Assuming that you have the right spirit, I do not guarantee you against *difficulties* in the perusal of the Bible, but I can remind you of one or two things which may qualify you for their proper treatment. For example, many minds are so constituted as to create their own difficulties. They do not fall easily into the way of faith. It is their specialty to doubt; they would doubt *your* word; they would question any unfamiliar history. Without the slightest wish to discredit your intelligence or uprightness, they would magnify everything that had happened in their own experience, and exclude everything as impossible which did not come within its scope. You will know whether your mind belongs to this order or not. If it does, let me urge you to doubt its *doubts*. Let it prey vigorously upon its own scepticism, for suicide is the only hope of such chronic doubtingness. Then, again, it is always useful in the perusal of such a book as the Bible to fasten the mind upon the fact that "truth is stranger than fiction." In common life, the law of probability is being continually set aside. Hence our daily surprise, and hence the very possibility of scepticism! We men make a large margin for the unknown, and leave some space even for the impossible. The Bible is by no pretence or claim of its own or its friends, a book of commonplaces. More vividly than is done, or could be done by any other book, it shows the points of communication between the divine and the human, and these points give forth startling fire because of the immediateness and intensity of the friction. *Expect* to find wonders in the Bible. At Niagara my surprise would be to find smooth water; my joy is to find what at the point of plunging the storm is infinite in its grandeur and blinding in its very fury. In coming to the Bible you must gird up the mind to its highest strength; your reverence must be profound; your expectation must be warmed into a cordial hope; and your self-trust must be put down to its lowest point. If you make no such preparation you will be completely disappointed, for God offers no revelation but to the humble, the contrite, the sore in heart. Your chief difficulty will arise from your self-exaggeration. But a relation by its very nature requires self-withdrawal and self-rebuke; it must be *received* into the mind, and tested in the practice and necessity of daily life. Instead of this, we question with much cross-examination, and find it to stand outside the intellectual gate, until we have offended by unnatural and most arbitrary inquiries. You must then get rid of the sophism that your *self* is the standard and test of revelation, and expect an *overflow* of Divine communication—an overflow that may, indeed, submerge the proudest elevation of your powers and attainments, and thus prove your conceit and your littleness. In addition to this, you must read the Bible *through*. Bind yourself as in a covenant not to ask a question or start a difficulty until you have read the book from end to end. In this way you will get into its pulse and rhythm. Its atmosphere will gather around you, and its histories and doctrines and parables, its commandments and beatitudes, will fall into their right relation and perspective, and the soul will be touched by the appeal of a new charm. This last suggestion is infinite in practical importance—so many readers are destitute of complete patience and dispassionateness. They see a geological difficulty, and close the book; or they come upon an arithmetical difficulty, and resign their faith. What would they say of a native of the tropics who closed