

Date written: January 21, 1950

Theme: How to study the Bible

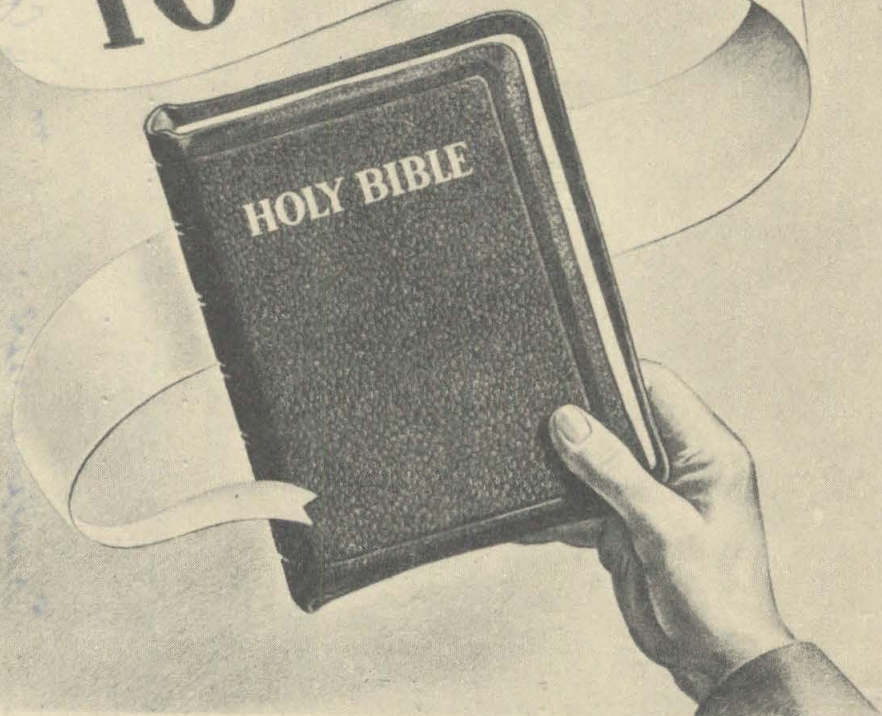
Proposition: Reverent, critical study of the Bible is the best way to find its meaning for life.

Text: Isaiah 55:11 - "So shall my word that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

Sources: The Public Speakers Treasure Chest, 856
Master Book of Humorous Illustrations, 417
Abingdon Bible Commentary, p. 3-15
Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 5th.ed., p. 853
Macartney's Illustrations, p. 33.

Places and dates preached: *Easton, Miss., 11 a.m. } Jan. 29, 1950*
Kauemper, Miss., 7 P.M. }

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1. The prison warden said to the inmates, "Boys, I've had charge of this prison for ten years, and we ought to celebrate the occasion. What kind of party do you suggest?"

With unanimous voice the prisoners replied, "Open house "

2. Because some of men's worst quarrels come out of their religious and political differences, it has become common to say, "I never argue religion or politics." It does seem hard for people to be unanimous about much in either of these areas of life. There is one thing about which the majority of the world's religious people agree. All branches of Christianity, the Mohammedan faith with its millions and the stubborn and tenacious Jewish faith all look upon the Bible as being a book of God. These various faiths interpret the Bible differantly; some emphasize the importance of the Bible more than others; they don't agree precisely on the books to be included in the Scripture; but in the main they are unanimous in thinking of the Old Testament and much of the New Testament as being Holy Scripture.

3. To this book, the Bible, so important to a large section of the world's population, we have been turning our attention recently. We have concluded that it is the best guide for everyday life. Here we want to learn something of the way or ways in which we should study the Bible in order to find its meaning for life. We are trying to determine how to read or study the Bible.

I. Critical study of the Bible is necessary to find its meaning for life.

1. Dr. Eaton, a former president of Madison University, was loved by the students. One day a student who had spoken in debate asked him what he thought of the effort. The doctor looked at him and then said slowly, "Edward, if you would pluck a few feathers from the wings of your imagination and stick them in the tail of your judgment, you would make better speeches."

sermons
Old Testament
Isaiah
55:6-11

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2. Often what we get out of the Bible, or what we think it says and believe it means, is based on the wings of either our own or someone else's imagination. Whatever the Bible may mean to us should be based, rather, on the exercise of careful and good judgment. This is what is meant when we apply the term "critical" to study of the Bible. This doesn't mean tearing down or disparaging the Bible. Rather, it means use of evidence in the Bible itself use of knowledge from other-than-Bible sources about the times of the Bible, and use of the results of the studies of diligent and consecrated Bible students. Use of all of these things to implement and guide in study and thinking constitutes critical study of the Bible.

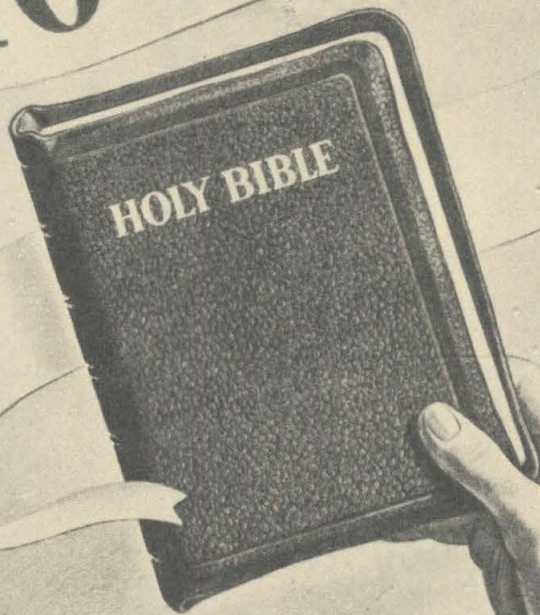
3. For critical study of the Bible, the first and most important essential is a knowledge of the background. The background of any Biblical passage or incident includes four things: (1) history, (2) geography, (3) religious development, and (4) context.

a. History. To understand any book of the Bible you must be able to place it in its historical setting. For example, careful study of the Bible itself, and of other ancient literature, reveals several periods into which Old Testament history is divided. They are (1) prehistoric (Gen. 1-11), (2) patriarchal, (3) Mosaid, (4) conquest of Canaan, (5) early kingdom under David and Solomon, (6) disruption of the nation and beginning of the Northern Kingdom, (7) Exile, (8) Restoration. The Book of Proverbs becomes intelligible when you know it is a product of the 5th. period, out of the early Kingdom under David and Solomon, when a broader way of looking at life came into Israel out of its contact with foreign peoples. Similarly, other parts of the Bible come to have meaning when one understands their historical background.

b. Geography. In the case of Israel more than in almost any other people, the facts of geography determined the lines of history and even of religion. Why was Israel split into 12 tribes? What was there in the geographical

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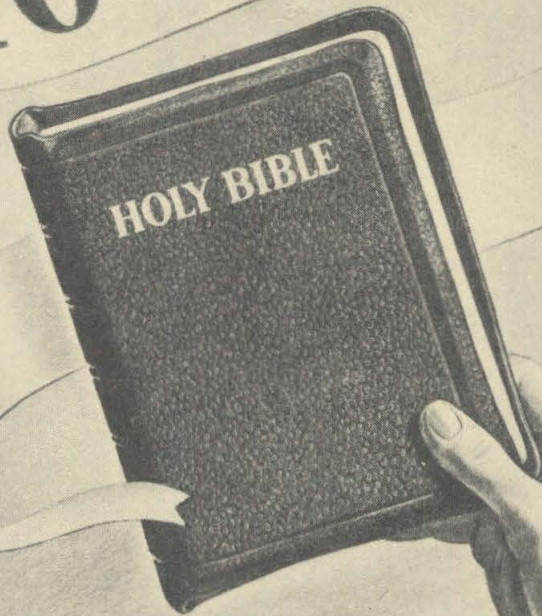
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4

environment that affected the message of Amos or John the Baptist? These and many other questions receive their answer in part when one knows the geography of Palestine. When you have formed a picture of the land and bring it to the study of the Bible, you find that picture throwing light on all sorts of incidents and features. It explains our Lord's parable of the two hearers in Matthew 7. It makes the parable of the good Samaritan a new story.

c. Religious development. One of the greatest services which criticism has rendered to the true understanding of the Scriptures has been its emphasis on the great truth of the progressiveness of revelation. The older idea of revelation was that it was something complete, given as a whole, with no progress, but all on the same level. Today, however, we see that revelation is a growth. It is a growth, not because there is anything imperfect in the Revealer, but because our human capacity grows. God can only reveal to one age what it is capable of taking in. And when we read the Bible we find that the truth God revealed both about himself and about our duty, came by degrees, becoming always clearer and fuller and more mature. We can trace the stages, from primitive ideas about God (such as his repenting, walking, breathing, etc.) on through the conception of Jehovah as a national God, to the proclamation of monotheism by the great prophets, and especially the declaration in Jeremiah and Ezekiel that God has an interest in the individual and finally to the revelation of God's Fatherhood in Christ. But the main fact for the student of the Bible is the progress in the revelation of God's love. The earlier thought of God in Israel was that of a severe righteous and even arbitrary God. And it is this primitive conception that accounts for many incidents in the Bible, which puzzle Bible readers. When we are told that God ordered the extermination of the Canaanites, men, women and children; when we read that Uzziah was killed by God for putting out his hand to steady the ark, we find it difficult

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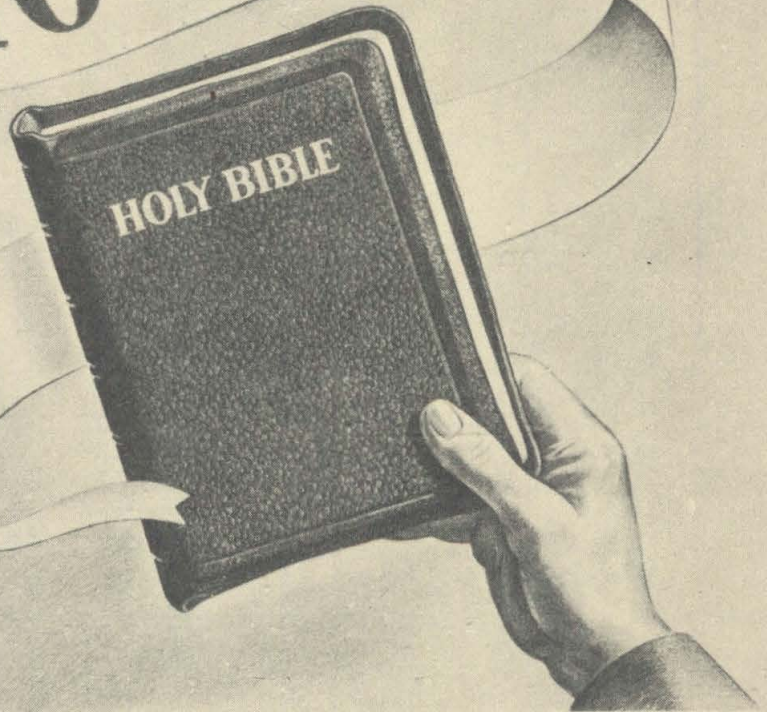
5

to reconcile this conception of God with Jesus' teaching about Him. But these difficulties are removed when we grasp the truth that revelation is a growth, that God only revealed his truth by degrees as they were able to bear it. We realize that God did not order the extermination of the Caananites, but that Israel imagined this to be her duty and attributed it to God. We do not believe that God destroyed Uzziah for a perfectly innocent and natural act. This was the writer's interpretation because he knew no better. We must constantly distinguish between fact and interpretation in the Bible. Uzziah's death was a fact, the writer's view of its cause was an interpretation. And the interpretation was wrong because the writer lived at an imperfect stage of revelation. Take this idea of religious development as a key in your hand as you study the Bible, and you'll find that it opens many doors. And, remember, this truth in no way lessens the authority of the Bible. It is not the God who is revealing himself who grows or changes, but the capacities of men to grasp what he is ready to impart.

d. Context. One way of understanding the context of any part of Scripture is by knowing the circumstances in which a book was written or a song was sung or a message was spoken, or an incident happened. Take a map and look for Assyria, and then for Egypt, and you see that Palestine is on the road between them. Then realize that these two powers were struggling for mastery in the world, and you will see the problem for Judah at the time. Should she support Assyria or Egypt? That is the situation behind Isaiah 30. There are endless examples of this way in which circumstances illuminate the context of Scripture.

But there is a narrower context which is just as important. You may read a passage from Job, and imagine that you are receiving truth from the word of God. But, if you paid careful attention, you would find that the passage might be from a speech by Bildad, one of Job's false friends, who is represented as expressing

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6
a traditional and exploded view of sufferings. It is this view of Bildad's that the whole book rejects, and Bildad's words are therefore not part of the Word of God at all, any more than Satan's are at the temptation of Jesus. Thus it is important to read a whole unit to understand the meaning of any particular context or passage.

4. It is sometimes imagined that criticism is hostile to the Bible, but that is not true. What criticism does is to place the books of the Bible in their environment, and to restore for some of the books man's understanding of the order in which they were written. The advantages of this are two: (1) The student is enabled to see the Bible as a whole, a book of God, and (2) you see the real line of man's religious development.

5. Critical study of the Bible, then, is necessary to understanding it. Such understanding brings better ability to use good judgment in finding and applying its meaning for life.

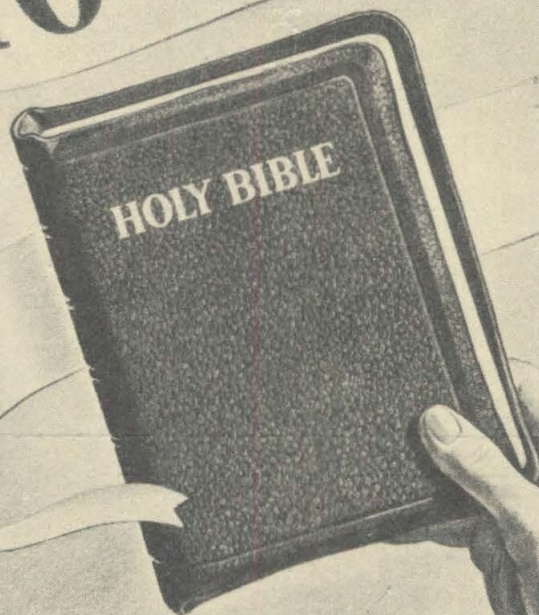
II. Reverent study of the Bible is necessary to find its meaning for life.

1. Reverence is profound respect mingled with love and awe. This definition suggests what is meant when we use the phrase "reverent study of the Bible."

2. Reverent study means study with honor and respect. Such an attitude is due the Bible at the least because of that which it has meant to people for hundreds of years, because of the way it has changed, inspired and given meaning to live and still does. Aware of these facts, we respect and honor it, love it, and come to it in awe, expecting to find something of meaning for our own lives.

2. In Derbyshire, England, there is a rock which on the outside looks like a dull lump of clay. But when it is broken with a hammer, it is

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7
found to have within it a hollow space lined with beautiful crystalline spar. So it is with even some of the most unpromising passages of the Bible, such as genealogical tables. It always pays to read them respectfully and in expectation, for in the midst of them you may come upon some beautiful treasure. For example, in the First Book of Chronicles, the prayer of Jabez in the monotonous list of those who were begotten and died.

3. To read the Bible reverently is to read it humbly and open-mindedly. On the other hand, to approach it with the attitude that you must be convinced, is to read it with a bias which at the beginning handicaps in finding meaning in it.

4. To study it reverently means that you will not approach it lightly or haphazardly. Real study presupposes a plan, and one should always have a plan in reading the Bible: to read in order of time written, to become familiar with the prophets, to trace all possible about Jesus, to become familiar with Paul.

a. Any plan should include certainly an occasional reading of at least one book at a sitting, to get its full impact and meaning.

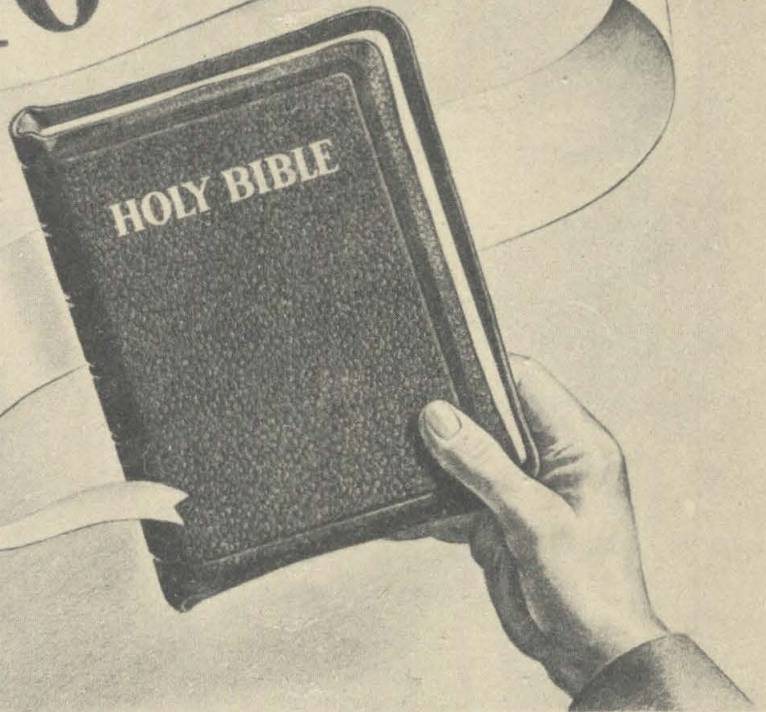
b. Reverent reading means making a Bible of your own; in that you choose the passages which appeal to you most, and become most familiar with them, perhaps keeping a notebook of such passages.

c. Just as in any area of life and learning, certain things must be memorized thoroughly and permanently, reverent study of the Bible demands that outstanding selections be memorized, that they may have a chance to become an integral part of the student.

d. Finally, reverent study demands regular study.

e. These are among the chief ways to study the Bible reverently, and are necessary to find its true meaning for life.

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Conclusion:

1. Critical study of the Bible includes an understanding of background of the various parts of the Bible, and a knowledge of the complete context of any particular section. Such critical study of the Bible is necessary to find the meaning of the Bible for life.

2. Reverent study of the Bible is to approach it with respect and honor, to study it with a definite plan, to become familiar with much of it, even to the point of memorizing parts of it, to study it regularly and without preconceived bias. Reverent study of the Bible is necessary to find the meaning of the Bible for ~~your~~ life.

3. Reverent critical study of the Bible is the best way to find its meaning for life.

In such study we come more nearly to understanding it as God means for it to be understood. His words are given by the prophet, the ones which we have taken as our text: "it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it."

