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## EC5532 Why I Read The Bible

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W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

WHY I READ THE BIBLE

By The Reverend Richard A. Dawson  
The Vine Congregational Church, Lincoln

Psychologists would explain my love and reverence for the Bible to the environment in which I grew to manhood. They would tell you that the child unconsciously absorbs the very atmosphere in which he lives, that a prayerful posture in the presence of a baby has unlimited potentialities for good, that the prominence given the Bible makes an impression on the subconsciousness of the infant which cannot be erased, that the reverence and love with which things of God were spoken and dealt with have influences which are as powerful in moulding attitudes in the child as our forefathers thought the "rod" had.

Before I could read a letter the stories with which I was tucked into bed were those picturing the love of God as recorded in the Bible. As early as I can remember, never a morning came but that the family remained at the breakfast table until father had read for us a chosen part of the Bible and sealed it with his paternal prayer. My mother studied it in her spare moments, my grandparents used to read it to each other in their room when the bitter cold of the Canadian winter kept them near their open fireplace; occasionally I would creep in and fall asleep on the floor lulled by the cadence of grandfather's rich voice as he read psalm or prophecy. As soon as I was able to read I had my own children's Bible. How I remember that Bible with its pictures on every second page and I still have a little thrill of pride when I think how I could tell the story of every picture before I had read of them at all.

In the sanity of saintly parenthood I was never made to memorize passages as a punishment, as I later learned was and is a barbaric practice of some households. Thus the Bible was never associated with unpleasant experiences or ideas. I have only the happiest and holiest memories of my early experiences with the Book.

As I look at my study shelves I count twenty-two Bibles there. Some are badly worn in cover and marginal scribbled, others stand worthily bound in leather which shows little wear, others demurely wait for a time when I will want their contribution to the work I am doing, but there they are, the most used books of my library; there they wait offering me their store of treasure, bidding me help myself at any time or in any mood to their wondrous collection of facts and figures of faith. As I look at them the words of a rhyme come to my mind.

When I am tired the Bible is my bed; or in the dark the Bible is my light;  
When I am hungry it is vital bread; or fearful it is armor for the fight.  
When I am sick 'tis healing medicine; or lonely, thronging friends I find  
therein.

If I would work, the Bible is my tool; or play, it is a harp of happy sound.  
If I am ignorant, it is my school; if I am sinking it is solid ground.  
If I am cold the Bible is my fire; and wings, if boldly I aspire.

Should I be lost the Bible is my guide; or naked, it is raiment, rich and  
warm.

Am I imprisoned, it is ranges wide; or tempest tossed, a shelter from the storm.  
Would I adventure, 'tis a gallant sea; or would I rest, it is a flowery lea.  
Does gloom oppress? The Bible is a sun.  
Or ugliness? It is a garden fair." -- Author unknown.

Need I go any further in my answer to the query, why I read the Bible? As with Prayer, with food, with sleep, with love, better may I say, "Why should I not read the Bible?"

May I take, however, three categorical reasons why I enjoy the reading of the book? They are necessarily obvious to anyone who studies the Bible and in all probability echo what already you have defined as your major argument in persuading others to study the book with you.

First, I read the Bible because IT IS THE WORLD'S GREATEST MASTERPIECE OF LITERATURE. No other book has entered so universally, so steadily and so surely into the life and thought of the world. It is the fountain from which is drawn not only illustrations but phrases and ideas which are used in every field of literary activity. Take out of the books, magazines, and indeed the newspapers which come to your home, every sentence, illustration or thought which the editor or author received at the storehouse of the Bible, and you will have left an incomprehensible hodge-podge of inconsequential ideas and facts. Here we have a masterpiece of literature which needs no argument in its defense for the centuries have attested to its majesty and its worth. Its poetry, biography, short stories, romances, adventures, history and sermons provide me with a library unsurpassed by any other sixty-six writings. More simple than the primer of the child, yet grander than the epic, the oration, the ode or the drama, this Book can be read and enjoyed by children or the most ignorant native in the most degraded society and be found delightful by them. The Fiji Islander may say, "I am there." The child finds his experience recorded in there. And yet the same book is read by the most learned philosophers and scholars, and satisfactions are found which no other book can afford. There is a power and comprehensiveness, a depth of thought and an elevation of sentiment which has appealed and is appealing to the wisest lovers of good literature and sane ideas. The humble millions to whom the Bible has been opened have found in its teachings such precepts as have brought unparalleled satisfactions in conduct. Preachers of power have gone to the Book for their themes.

It behooves any educated man to know the world's greatest masterpiece and the world's best seller, the world's most treasured volume and the world's most quoted book. I read the Bible because ignorance in it would be gross ignorance indeed. The society lady who was entertaining the clergyman and attempted to show her knowledge of the Bible by referring to the lovely story of Eliza crossing the river on ice with the bloodhounds pursuing her, was a tragic figure; but she cannot be compared with the tragic group of students who didn't know the story of the Good Samaritan, nor could they quote a single phrase from the Sermon on the Mount. The youth who is so unacquainted with the Book of Books that he thinks Matthew, Mark, Luther, and John were disciples, or that Paul is the name of a Book of the Bible, or that Mary and Jacob lived in Eden, or that Sodom and Gomorrah were brother and sister, while Dan and Bersheba were husband and wife, or that Amos is a colored comedian in David's court, or that the Bible tells of the Son of Ham walking across the Red Sea on their hands and feet, thus making the palms of the negro white--well, all the tragic evidences of ignornacé which he exhibits are to be deplored quite as much as if he couldn't distinguish between Henry Ford and Jane Addams, or thinks that the "technocrats" are a kind of a breakfast cereal.

I read the Bible because I would be ashamed to show in society my ignorance of a book which has such an illustrious history and such a universal appeal. I read it because it is the world's greatest masterpiece of literature.

Now it is impossible that society could have this book in its midst for so many centuries and not be influenced by its teachings. One finds that wherever there has been an improvement in the lot of nations, institutions or individuals, there the Bible has been elevated and the eternal word of God written on the conscience. A tree is known by its fruit, and the Bible-reading nations are those which have developed under the guidance and the light of the message received from the book.

The testimony of some of the greatest statesmen of America and of England substantiate this claim that the Bible is the foundation stone of true democracy: "The Magna Charta of the poor, the rock on which our Republic rests," said Andrew Jackson. "The best gift God has given to man," said Abraham Lincoln. "The dependence of organized government," said Calvin Coolidge. "The richest library of human experience," said Herbert Hoover; and from Woodrow Wilson, "The Bible is the word of life. I beg that you will read it and find this out for yourselves." While Gladstone said: "The greatest question of international importance is to send the Bible to every man, woman, and child in every nation."

Again, those institutions which are making a contribution to the good life of the world are societies founded on the inspiration of the Biblical message. We look in vain for a Bible in the councils of the anti-prohibitionary forces. Will you find any reference to the teachings of the Book in the statements of the advocates of a greater navy and warmakers? Have you seen a pocket-testament in the possession of the promoter of prize fights? Upon what statement in the Bible do the Nazis found their persecution of the Jews, or the capitalists their oppression of the poor, or the politicians their right to fleece the people. On the other hand look in on those societies which are aiding man in his climb to decency and divinity--the churches builded on the word of God, the philanthropic agencies of the community acting on the word of God, the great national and international societies for the promotion of Brotherhood and Justice, seeking to practice the teachings of the word of God. Wherever you see good-will and unselfishness there you will find the light on the Bible directing the ideals of the institution.

If you would keep the youth of the nation out of crime, give them the Bible to read.

If you would elevate your public school system, have the Bible prominent in the classroom and in the spirit of the teachers.

If you would keep the spirit of fair-play in court and country, learn the Bible.

If you would make America God's country, open the Bible to the citizens and let them learn that "nations that forget God, perish."

Another fruit which I find on the tree of the knowledge of the Bible along with good governments and good institutions is good characters. Wherever the Bible has made entree and controlled the human heart it has produced characters which have been the admiration of the world. Milton was so controlled by the Bible that he produced his English epic, "Paradise Lost." Franklin was dominated by Biblical ideals and left a heritage for us unrivaled by other American statesmen. Isaac Newton confessed that his philosophy was moulded by that of the Bible. Washington,

Lincoln, Emerson, Channing and innumerable others of our own men have filled their writing with tributes to the control of their lives by the Bible. Think of Beethoven and Haydn and Mendel; think of the great artists of the centuries and you think of men who thought in the mould set by the Book with which they were familiar. Lew Wallace started to write "Ben Hur" as a novel to help do away with Christianity. In preparation for his work he carefully studied the New Testament and its power over him was such that he was completely turned about and wrote "Ben Hur" as a tribute to Christ and the Bible.

The Gospel which made Mary the defiled, a saint; Peter the wavering, a valiant man; Thomas the doubter, a loyal son of God; has been making men and women through the centuries like the Master after whom they patterned their lives. I stood on the spot where Savonarola was martyred in Florence, Italy; I saw the torture chamber where Tyndale and Wyckliffe suffered in London; I saw the place where the first English Bible was printed; I studied the magnificent labor of the monks who illuminated the early scriptures; I shared the martyrs their breath in the Roman Colosseum and visited the prison in which Paul wrote some of his immortal sentences ere he was beheaded; and through it all I saw the influence of the written word of the Gospel flowing down the centuries into the continents bringing new life and hope to millions and I swore I would read this Book more and more because of its influence on society and on individuals. I read the Bible because what it has done may again be done in me.

Thirdly, I read the Bible because it is a very personal book, in which I find a very personal message. Commissioned with no less than a communication from Heaven I find in looking at the Bible that it is something of a telescope for me whereby I can see things and understand them which otherwise were baffling me. For instance, the New Testament is the only piece of literature which keeps alive my "sense of eternity." The poet has said, "Leave NOW for apes and dogs, Man has FOREVER." Man has forever when he accepts the words of Jesus Christ. Through this telescope of time and place I can see the usefulness of my three-score years and ten, as a glorious prelude to a golden symphony beyond the grave. Then I think of the Bible as my road map. It is a guide, a planned road is laid out before me. No, not a guide in science. It does not profess to teach technocrats, or is it always a door whereby some of the mysteries of life can be explained, although it aids in adapting us to those mysteries.

It is not minute in its detail, it has nothing to say about the trivialities of our daily round. There are some people who say they will not do this, that, or the other thing because the Bible gives them no authority to do so. I have never read in the Bible that I should wash my neck when I was a child, nor that I should not dance as a youth. There is no mention of such things. What I did find as a child, and know as a youth is that in the Bible I have a guide to the good life. Certain commonplaces of life are left to our God-sense and have no bearing on the moral or ethical outcome of our actions. I find that Jesus was motivated by certain dominant ideals and He bent every action of His life to fulfill those ideals. He did things which the Bible said were unlawful to do, and left undone things which drew upon Him the spite of the church, but He was never convicted of moral or ethical turpitude and lived His wholesome natural manhood with a single eye.

I read the Bible because it provides me with a guide, a canon, a balance, whereby I can measure my actions, yea, my ideals in the light of Jesus' teachings.

Finally I read the Bible because it contains the biographies of some of the finest people who ever walked the green fields of God's populated planet. How

can I be a narrow nationalist when I read what a simple woman called Ruth did? How can I be a bigoted Nordic when I read the story of Jonah? How can I be selfish when I study the character of Abraham? How can I fail to be magnanimous when I know of Hosea? How can I fear when I study the life of Jeremiah? How can I fail to have faith, hope and charity when I know these are the attributes of all the close followers of the Christian ideal.

Here is biography unperfumed, unwhitewashed, giving me insight into the frailties of humankind and the triumphs of overcoming temptations. Here is the only authentic biography of the Central Personality of Christianity. All other books get their materials from this Book; here the Man of God is painted in colors which last through the centuries and guide men as lighthouses to fullness of life and completeness of character. Here is a record of the life and work of Jesus, a biographical work which outshines any biography ever penned by man. I read the Bible in order that I may know from early sources and from eye-witnesses the kind of a man I am following, and having learned of Him I am better fitted to keep alive His spirit and do His commands on earth.

I read the Bible,--yes, I read the Bible for reasons unnumbered, but I confess that I read it because ignorance in its literature would shame me, knowledge of its teachings bless me, and acquaintance with its central personalities give me untold joys, and eternal hopes.

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