

MAKE THE BIBLE CLASS *MORE* WORTHWHILE

What do you think about the Bible Class in your ecclesia? Are you worried because a lot of your brethren and sisters don't go? Do *you* go? Do you excuse yourself by saying that you feel you don't get much out of it, or you just haven't time?

Just consider one of the biggest Bible Classes ever held. It was in the open air. "All the people gathered themselves together as one man" into a large square in the city, "men, women and all that could hear with understanding." The leader went up on to a platform, and when the people saw him "open the book", they all stood up; and when he offered prayer to "the Lord, the great God", they all responded, "Amen, Amen", and bowed their heads in worship. Then the leader read to them out of the Word of God; in fact he read "from early morning until midday"(!). With his assistants he "caused the people to understand" and brought out the sense of what was being read.

There was an astonishing result: all the people wept when they heard the words of God! But the leader said, Do not mourn or weep. Go and rejoice in your fellowship together, for this day is holy unto the Lord. Do not be grieved, for "the joy of the Lord is your strength". Then all the people went away and rejoiced together, "because they had understood the words".

All that happened a long time ago, when the exiles came back from Babylon to a Jerusalem still in ruins. They had rebuilt the wall and now they came together to hear Ezra read from the law of God (Nehemiah 8: 1 - 12), But note how caught up they were:

- The *whole community* came together.
- When the Word of God was opened, they all worshipped.
- The reading was with explanations so that all could understand.
- They must have listened for 5-6 hours!
- When they understood what God had been saying in His Word about righteousness and sin, *they all wept*.
- Ezra and his Levite helpers saw this as a good reaction. But they said, Go rather and rejoice in your fellowship today unto the Lord, for "delight in the Lord is a strong refuge" (that's what his words really mean).
- What a contrast with the frequently casual and apathetic atmosphere of our poorly attended Bible Classes!
- How rarely we can get "the whole ecclesia" together.
- How different sometimes is our attitude to the Word of God—and we have all the treasures of the New Testament as well!
- How impatient some of us get if the speaker goes on longer than we think he should. As for 5-6 hours...!
- How rarely does our study of Scripture lead us to deep feelings and to repentance.
- How little do we feel that "delight in the Lord is a strong refuge".

What can we do about it?

No whipping-up process, no urgent appeals from the platform are going to have any effect unless we are convinced that the word of God is absolutely *vital to us today*.

Most of those Israelites who listened to Ezra had returned after years of exile in a foreign land. They needed not only to rebuild their beloved Jerusalem: they needed even more to rebuild their own faith and hope in the promises of God. And they turned to the only possible source for this reviving of their spirits—the Word of God.

There they found all that they needed:

- assurance that God had done great things for their fathers;
- knowledge of His will for them;
- warnings of His prophets against indifference;
- evidence that even their recent sufferings had been foretold;
- an overwhelming sense of sin;
- above all, joy that all was not lost, for God had made it possible for them to return. These very Scriptures which they had heard gave them encouragement and hope.

So they wept and were comforted. "Delight in the Lord is a strong refuge".

What was the secret of their involvement? How were they caught up? They were deeply moved because they felt that the Word of God was speaking directly to their disturbed and discouraged hearts. It applied to them, not just as a people, but to *each one personally*. It renewed their faith and revived their hope. In short, it was vital for their life *that very day* in Jerusalem. No wonder they responded.

Now what about us?

Doesn't all this pinpoint our weakness? If many of us feel no urge to come to the Bible Class, must it not be that the Scriptures no longer seem vital to us *today*? We don't reject them, of course. They are the Word of God and they tell us what God did for Israel and how Christ came and preached the Gospel and that he will come again to set up the Kingdom of God and rule over all nations. But somehow they don't seem to matter to us *personally*. They don't seem to speak so directly to us that we *have* to get together to read them and talk about them.

Whose fault is it: the Scriptures' or ours? The Bible is eternal truth. God's Word deals with the great issues of life and good, death and evil, and *they* don't change. What the Bible says about them is just as vital for us as it was for Israel in Moses' day, or Ezra's or for the early believers of the Gospel, or for all believers ever since. If we don't feel that the Bible is vital, then the fault is in *us*. In a sense, the Bible has died on us.

We must expose this weakness and tackle it before it is too late. The trouble is that we don't see our need so clearly, nor feel it so deeply as those Israelites in Ezra's day did theirs. They had been restored from a painful exile and had been compelled to rebuild their ruined city. They needed an explanation of what had happened to them and they found it. They needed a word of reassurance and hope in their distress, and they found that too.

So this is the vital point:

- we must realise our need—we certainly have one!
- we must realise that only the Bible can meet it.

Our need of what?

Only a few need material things like houses and food and clothes. The rest have enough and to spare. The need is deeper. It is not only a need to be delivered from corruption and death, though that grows sharper as our years increase and the grave draws nearer. It is a *spiritual* need: a need to feel in our lives a harmony with the will of God. It is a need to be delivered from *ourselves*, creatures of flesh and blood, having a will of our own which we constantly indulge.

For the truth is we have a deep-rooted natural tendency to seek our own pleasure and above all our own comfort. We see things and want them for ourselves and forget that the Bible calls

it covetousness. We become insensitive to the needs of others—we do not "walk in love"—because we have forgotten our own deepest need. And we do all this without ever once committing a "serious" transgression like stealing, or getting drunk, or adultery. We're very respectable people really and so we are hardly aware of our need of deliverance from sin, not just on the day of resurrection, but *now*, today and every day.

The Bible knows our need and meets it

Just listen to it:

- "The heart is deceitful above *all things and* desperately sick" (Jeremiah 17:9).
- "From within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts etc. ... all these evil things come from within and *defile the man*" (Jesus, in Mark 7: 21-23).
- The Apostle Paul, realising his natural state, exclaims, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7: 24).
- But the revelation of God's grace and forgiveness leads him to add: "I thank God, through Jesus Christ our Lord".

That is why we need to know the Bible really well.

But there is more: we need to *keep in constant contact with it*. It is not enough to know the principles of the Gospel, essential as these are. Spiritual truths are not natural to us. We have a built-in tendency to push them to the back of our minds and to forget them. Isn't that what Israel did? Isn't it just what Peter warns us about? He who lacks faith, knowledge, endurance, self-control, reverence for God and love of the brethren (all signs of a spiritual attitude and understanding) "is blind and cannot see afar off and has *forgotten that he was purged from his old sins*" (2 Peter 1 : 5-9).

That's what we end up by forgetting. That's why we urgently need regular contact with the Word of God. Its influence alone can preserve our vision clear and bright and enable us to draw near to God "in spirit and in truth".

That's why we need the Bible Class

All of us. On Sundays we meet for exhortation and remembrance and for proclaiming the great truths of Scripture. Our daily readings are meant to keep us in touch with the inspired writings which are "profitable for reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness". Their part is vital too (what a warning sign it is if we are no longer doing them, or perhaps only now and then!). The Bible Class is our support in the middle of the week, when we can attend to the wide range of Divine revelation in matters of doctrine, of conduct and of personal faith and service. "The whole counsel of God" is our subject—and our opportunity. We listen so that we may understand it and we discuss for our mutual help.

How to make the Bible Class more inspiring?

First, *the programme*.

- To draw it up is a privilege and a responsibility. Those chosen to do it should be brethren who honour the Scriptures, have a good understanding of them, and regularly attend themselves.
- They should choose a wide range of subjects from both Old and New Testaments, avoiding over-specialisation. So the great "examples" of the whole Scripture may serve as warning and instruction and encouragement for all.
- They can invite subjects from the congregation by putting up a sheet on the ecclesial notice board.
- They should strive to make the wording of the subject both informative and attractive.

But the audience must recognise that an address with a very ordinary sounding title could be a gem of instruction.

- Subject to the decision of the ecclesia, they should provide some opportunities for the congregation to comment upon what has been said.
- When there are to be comments on the address, they should appoint a president who will know how to stop a discussion which is becoming unprofitable and to divert it into a more edifying channel.

The speakers must rise to the occasion

- They have a vital part to play. They are not just there to fill a gap in the programme. They have before them brethren and sisters needing to understand the Scriptures better and to find in them the answer to their spiritual needs.
- They must not be content with just "retelling the story" of some part of Scripture.
- Their quest must constantly be, not merely "What are the facts?" (essential as these are), but "What is the Divine wisdom *behind the facts*?"

Example: that God permitted the Kingdom of Israel to be divided into two after the death of Solomon is a fact. Why in His wisdom did He allow it? Look at the result: thousands of faithful Israelites left their corrupt circumstances in the north and flocked south to Judah, evidently deciding, "This is no place for us".

- The next step is vital: the speaker must show that the same principles of Divine wisdom can *apply to us*. We too could find ourselves in such a corrupting situation—in business, for example—that we feel, "This is no place for us".
- They must prepare for their task by careful reading of Scripture on the subject and by thinking about its meaning.
- They must present their conclusions clearly, so as to bring out the important lessons.
- They must give themselves plenty of time for this preparation.
- Above all, they must commit themselves and their task to God in prayer.

Let not young or inexperienced speakers feel daunted by this responsibility. If their study of Scripture is careful and sincere, their work will be blessed. *They* will profit and so will those who hear them.

The audience

This is where we all come in.

- We should, above all, be present! And every week, not just when we fancy the speaker or the subject.
- We should come desiring to understand better the Word of God and be ready to learn from it.
- We should think about the subject beforehand (we know what it is). How would we approach it? What questions does it raise?
- We should open our Bibles and look at the passages quoted (Speakers, give us time to find them!).
- We should note anything we do not understand and bring it up afterwards in conversation with those who seem best able to answer our queries.

A Final Thought

Are we reluctant to take these steps, discouraged and depressed by past experience? If so, remember that apathy is part of a vicious circle: we lose interest and neglect the Bible Class and the daily reading of Scripture. And because we so neglect the only source that can save us—the Word of God—we drift further away from Him and lose contact, even in prayer. The vicious circle has to be broken.

It can only be broken by *a return to contact with the Word of God*. All else springs from that. For "the things written aforetime", said Paul, "were written for our learning", that through *the* patience (endurance) and *the* comfort which the Scriptures bring, we might have—not just a vague hope—but *the* hope of salvation (Romans 15:4).

At first we shall have to do in faith and trust what needs to be done. But if our heart is sincere and we desire to draw near to God, He will not forsake us. When "they that feared the Lord spake often one to another" and "thought upon His name", then "the Lord hearkened and heard it" (Malachi 3 : 16-17).

He still does. His book of remembrance is not yet closed and the Bible Class becomes much more worth while when it is helping every one of us to become part of His "peculiar treasure". As in Ezra's day, so in ours: "Delight in the Lord is a strong refuge."

APPENDIX

Suggested Bible Class Topics

As the theme of Dedication will need maintaining along with that of Witness in 1976, the following suggestions based on the life and work of Christ may be found helpful.

The Life of Jesus Christ our Lord

- The writings which promised him
- The land of his birth
- The people to whom he came
- Life under the Law
- Sects of the Jews
- The Romans in authority
- When the time was come...
- His birth and growth to manhood
- His forerunner—John the Baptist
- His manifestation and baptism
- His temptation
- His witness in works
- His witness in word
- The ministry in Galilee
- The ministry in Perea
- The final witness in Jerusalem
- His witness after his resurrection

Witness for Christ

The following are taken from chapter headings of the book by C. C. Walker. Although this book is now out of print, there must be many copies in circulation.

Christ as Son of God
Christ as Son of Man
Christ as Tempted
Christ as Preacher
Christ as an Authority
Christ as Master
Christ as Servant
Christ as Sacrifice
Christ the Resurrection
Christ the Life
Christ the Judge
Christ as Sanctuary
Christ as God's Altar
Christ as God's High Priest

The Dedication of the Faithful

The Scriptures are rich in examples of faithful servants of God who dedicated their lives to His service. The following are an obvious selection:

From the O.T.: Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Elisha, all the prophets (Jeremiah and Daniel being very helpful examples), Ezra and Nehemiah.

From the N.T.: John the Baptist; all the Apostles, especially Peter, John and Paul.

In studying the lives of these faithful saints, a speaker could set out to answer questions like these:

How were they called? To what were they required to dedicate themselves? How did they show their dedication? What was the effect upon themselves? And upon those who heard them?

Finally, and most important: What warnings and encouragement can we find in their example?

The Witness of the Faithful

Each of these dedicated servants was also a witness. A speaker could try to answer questions like: To what were they witnesses? What was the special message of each? How was their witness received? What was the judgement of God in the case?

Again, most important: What have we, as witnesses in our day, to learn from their experience and example ?

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