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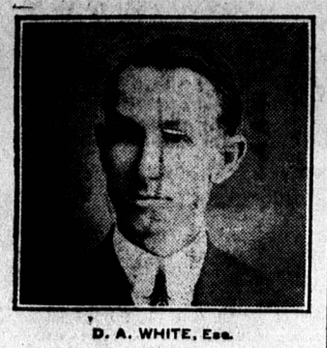

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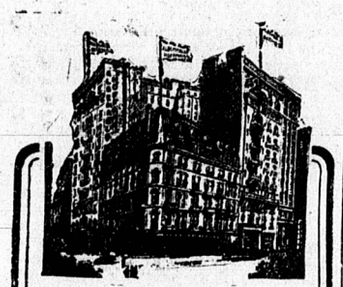

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THE BIBLE;

By

The Rev. Dr. Malcolm James MacLeod.

The Rev. Dr. Malcolm James McLeod, pastor of the Collegiate Church of St. Nicholas, Fifth Avenue and Forty-eight street, Manhattan, preached on "The Bible." The texts were from Isaiah xliv:20, "He feeedth on ashes," and Isaiah lv, 1 and 2, "Ho, every one that thirstest, come ye to the waters." Dr. McLeod said:

"He feedeth on ashes." That is to say the man's appetite is depraved. There are heathen tribes who, in time of famine, use clay as a substitute for flour. Humboldt tells us that on the banks of the Orinoco he found the native Indians using a white, powdery earth, and kneading it into balls and storing it up against the long winter season. Dean Crawford in his book "Thinking Black," speaks of dumplings made from the roots of bushes mixed with moss. They have a small percentage of decayed plant life in them. It is of the nature of silica and contains just enough nutriment to sustain existence at the starvation point for a little while.

In the chapter before us the prophet is attacking idolatry and he is very graphic. There is a scathing satire in his words. He is describing the whole process of God— manufacture. "What profit is there," he says, "in your graven image?" The carpenter hewed it and the blacksmith clamped it. That of which it is made is lifeless. It is only the stock of the cedar tree. With the small pieces of kindling wood he makes a fire and warms his hands and bakes his bread and roasts his meat. And with the residue thereof he maketh a god. So part of the tree becomes a god and part becomes ashes. That is to say, he tries to find in the very stuff that warms his body something that will warm his poor, cold, lonely heart.

And the prophet's purpose is clear—to shame men out of such folly, to rebuke them, to show them the peurility of it all. He uses humor, he uses irony, he uses invective. "Shall we fall down," he says, "to the stock of a tree?" What profit is there in kneeling down to a graven image or a molten image and saying: "Deliver me; ;thou art my god"? But all his word pictures are simply weapons to expose the utter childishness of idol worship. It is vanity, it is deception, it is feeding on ashes.

Well, you say, times have changed; this is ancient history; this is the forest primeval; no one today bows down to wood and stone. No doubt that is true in civilized lands at least. I frankly confess that the Second Commandment, in its material sense, means very little to me. I go into a Roman church and these crucrixes and images of the Saviour tempt me not the slightest to bow down to them. Indeed, they often have quite a sobering effect. I feel sometimes humbled with a feeling of devotion as I creep noiselessly through these shrines. One often wishes that he had a little more of their reverence in our Protestant temples. The New Testament says very little about material idolatry. Paul scarcely alludes to it. It is another kind of idolatry that is dangerous today. It is spiritual idolatry we need to fear today. The world is full of what John Wesley called "inward idols." Covetousness in Scripture is identified with idolatry.

I sometimes think that one of the most surprising verses in the whole Bible is that last verse in the First Epistle of John. "Little Children, keep yourselves from idols." Remember, John is writing to Christians. "Little children," he says. He means those who have been born again. The fact that there can be such a thing as a Christian idol is almost startling. We have heard much of heathen idols, but we are told of Christian idols. John is an old man now, and he is writing to the Church at Ephesus, and he says: "Beware of Christian idolatry. There are rivals to the one true God. 'My little children, keep yourselves from the idols.' "

Whatsoever cometh as a cloud between
The eye of faith and things unseen,
Causing that bright world to disappear,
Or seem less lovely or its hopes less dear,
That is our idol, though it bear
Affection's impress or devotion's air.

Now that is very odd, is it not? That a Christian should engage in idolatry seems incongruous. What is an idol? An idol is a substitute for God. How can a Christian have a substitute for God? Paul says an idol is "nothing in the world." And the supreme tragedy of life is that we put a great Nothing in place of a something. And the Apostle says: "My little children guard yourselves." Be on your guard. The word he uses means to watch, to be vigilant, to be on the alert. Guard yourselves as an officer guards a treasure. Be on the lookout as a sailor is. "And there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." It is the same word that is used." Take heed and beware of covetausness." The same word again. "My little children, guard yourselves from the idols."

This, then, is the old prophet's description of idolatry. It is "feeding on ashes." And one does not require much imagination to appreciate the metaphor; it is so vividly unpleasant. The gritty cinders get into the teeth. They irritate the tongue. They make the lips dry, and the gums hard and bitter. And what is worst of all, they do not nourish the body. They only cause torture and distress. There is no nutriment in ashes. Ashes are dead things. Ashes are the particles left over after combustion. They will not even burn. The black savage will live for a little while on some forms of coverousness." The same word No cactus can live on ashes. Even a worm cannot live on ashes. It is a symbol of utter collapse and drought and death and ruin. And for a man to try to feed his immortal soul on idols is a parallel case in the life of the spirit; it is the direst, bitterest mockery. It is feeding on ashes.

And now, after all, this spurious and mocking recital may we turn for a moment to our second text a little further on. It is more refreshing and satisfying. It is like leaving the hot, arid desert for the murmur and coolness of the busy brook. The allegory too, is a beautiful one. "Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? Literally, for that which is deceitful bread; for that which is no bread at all. The prophet, remember, is talking about the Word. The one hope of this exiled people was in the Word, for which they waited more than they that watch for the morning. "So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth; it shall not return unto me void.' The Word is the revelation of the Lord. We do not confine it, of course, to the Bible. God speaks to us in many ways. He speaks in history, in conscience, in prayer; but He speaks pre-eminently through the Word. "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the Word of our God shall stand forever." Here is bread and wine and milk and honey. "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread at all. Incline your ear and come unto me. Hear and your soul shall live." God is what the heart of man cries out for, and it is the purpose of the Word to reveal God.

Now the Word has a three-fold ministry. It is a weapon; it is a light, and it is the food of our spiritual natures. Let us glance at these metaphors for just a moment in the light of Christian experience.

1. It is a weapon. We read in the letter to the Ephesians, the armour of the Christian. "Take unto you," the Apostle says, "the whole armour of God. * * * the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." It is no dead symbol of the past; it is a living instrument. It is the sword of the Spirit. It penetrates to the joints and marrow. Have you not felt sometimes when reading your Bible that it was hurting you, that it was piercing you and laying bare the secrets of your inner life? Oftentimes this is a very painful exposure. The surgeon takes his knife and cuts into the flesh. He is on the search for trouble. And that is the way with the Bible. Some books appeal to the intellect, some appeal to the sense of humor, some appeal to the dramatic, some to the sensual, some to the artistic. But the Bible's appeal is the conscience. It searches out our spirits. It never flatters. It unmasks the disease; and the successful Bible teacher is the one who knows his weapon and can wield it in practical Christian work. "All Scripture," we are told, "is profitable for correction."

There is one verse in the Fourth Gospel that always fills me with courage. It is found in the thirty-fifth verse of the tenth chapter: "The Scripture cannot be broken." And when we remember that the speaker is none other than the Incarnate Word Himself, the statement becomes filled with a tremendous import. "The Scripture cannot be broken." The Holy Book cannot be destroyed. It cannot be undone; it is invincible. Critics may dissect it and carve it and mutilate it, but the Great Teacher says it is deathless and enduring. It resists every outslaught. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my word shall not pass away." And it is worth noting that when He spoke these words He was referring to a little, unimportant Psalm of eight verses—the Eighty-second Psalm. Even the minor parts cannot be broken. It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one title of the law to fail. The critics say that the Bible is only a scrap of paper. They say it. Who say it? The critics themselves—that is all. There never was such an armoury of weapons for the defence of the Bible as there is today; but let us remember that the greatest weapon is the Bible itself. What does Jesus say about His own book? That is our supreme Damascus blade. He ought to know. Let us study how to use it so that when Satan comes and says, "Command that these stones be made bread," we may grasp our glorious Excalibur and imitate our Master and say, "it is written.'

II. Then think of the Bible as a light. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path." The entrance of Thy word giveth light." Paul tells Timothy that the Scriptures are able to make him wise. He means the wisdom which enlightens. Dr. Wallace, who was the official clerk at the Westminister, likens the Scriptures to a lantern rather than a light. They shine, he says, but with a borrowed light. It is the light of God that shines in the Book. He is the only true light. And what is a lantern? A lantern is a vessel that holds the light. There are many varieties of lanterns? but the purpose of them all is the same. It is to hold the torch that shines forth for the guidance and comfort of man. But we never know a book until we know the soul of that book. And the soul of the Bible is Jesus. He is the light of the world, but He is also the light of the word. A return to the word of God has always sent men to the Son of God. "These are they which testify of Me." His star shines dimly through the Old Testament, but in the New Testament He floods the skies with glory. His star becomes a Sun.

And so, I repeat, the Bible is a great light. If a man denies it, do not stop to argue with him. What he needs is not an argument but eyes. Just tell him to go forth and do a little traveling and use his eyes. Send him to the dark continent and see what it has done there. Send him down to Exromanga and see what has happened there. They have no idols there any more. If you want idols you have to come here to New York where they are manufactured. Tell the poor, belighten fellow to go to Uganda. Kaulbach's great cartoon represents Luther holding up an open Bible like some statue of liberty enlightening the world. And it is a true conception. Where this book has not gone there is darkness. Where it has gone, but is partially obscured, there is twilight. But where it is free and open and unhindered, there is the light of civilization. All that is needed to show what a light the Book is, is a map of the world. If a tree is known by its fruits, then no tree in all the fields of literature is like this tree. The best to measure an institution is to measure its influence. The great rivers of the world are important according to their mileage and navigibility and utility. Just so with books. A book that lives on and feeds the race for ages must be a great book. Here is an old volume, a very old volume. It has come down to us from the very twilight of time, older than the Pyramids, older than Homer, older than Cadmus. The book of Job existed before Cadmus brought his letters into Greece. And yet, though hoary with age, its youthful vigor remains. It has grown younger with the years. Many of these documents go back into what we call the prehistoric, and yet they are as fresh today as the page that fell yesterday damp and wet from the press.

III. And then, lastly and best of all, the Bible is food. It is the food of our spiritual natures. Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." Some plants grow without either earth or water. Simply hang them in the air and that is all they need. But grace is not such a plant. Grace needs good, solid meat. Grace needs something substantial. Grace needs sun and earth and air and water. Grow in Grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

The hyacinth is an interesting flower. It will flourish for a little while in a vase of water, but if it is to prepetuate itself it must have soil. And if a Christian is to grow, he too must have soil; he must be rooted in the Bible; he must draw nourishment therefrom. He must read it. And he must read it regularly. A reptile, they say, can gorge himself once a week on a meal, but not so a Christian. A neglected Bible means a lean soul, a barren spiritual experience. She was a wise mother who gave a bookmark to her boy on condition that he would never allow it to remain two days in succession at the same page. The Christian who neglects his Bible will soon shrivel and waste away. That is all there is to it. He will go into decline.

We are commanded to Search the Scriptures." Not scrutinize, but search. The word used is the word that the Apostle makes use of in Romans, when he says, He that searcheth the heart knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit." Surely, when God is searching our hearts, He is not looking for faults and flaws. He is looking rather, is he not for what is beautiful and noble? he is looking for those sacred longings which are the expressions of the Spirit's influence. Nor are we told to parse; we are to search; there is treasure in the Book. How fond we are of parsing! In school we would take an immortal poem and parse it; cometimes parse the life out of it. We said: The curfew tolls the knell of parting day"; the, an article, curfew, a noun, tolls, a verb, etc. It was all dissection and analysis. And many there are who read the word this way. They cut it up and so kill its soul. But the Book says, when we are tearing it apart and mangling it. Open thou mine eyes that I may behold wonderous things out of thy law." The sad fact is, that we can analyze the written word and miss the living Word. Search the Scriptures." A great divine has said. "Eat up the Book." Digest it. Make a diet of the Word. Food lying on the table does not strengthen us. The Bible is a book of comfort; it fortifies our faith; it strengthens. Never mind a key to the Scriptures—the Book is its own key.

I have heard it said that some theological students lose their religion while they are getting their theology. If that is true, it is certainly a lamentable exchange. We do not know the Bible by studying its form and structure. Studying Biblican criticism is not studying the Bible. Last summer, during my vacation, I was visited one day and asked to conduct the funeral of one of the old inhabitants. And the request was made that I should say a few words at the grave. I hinted that I had not been acquainted with the deceased, and that it was a difficult thing to do. But the morning of the funeral his daughter sent me his Bible, and what a revelation! I never saw anything quite like it. It was as if one were looking into the holy of holies of a man's soul. Favorite verses underlined; little, short, simple comments; prayers for the guidance of the Spirit. Some of the pages almost worn with the fingering, like old bank notes. Everywhere the marks of use. Dates when Communion was taken Texts that troubled him. I can never forget that book. I noticed it was only twelve years old, but it looked as if it might have been in the Ark. If you were to die tomorrow, dear friend, and your Bible were to fall into your minister's hands, what tale would it tell?

I believe the hour has come when it is our duty to talk less about the Bible and to read it more. The world today is not reading the Bible. The world today is feeding largely on trash. To a large number the Book is a closed Book. In one of our large universities out West last winter there was held one day an examination on the Bible. The ignorance was simply appalling. In a class of several hundred sophomores, only fourteen knew in what town Jesus was born. The claim has quite recently been made that more Bibles have been sold this past year than any other one hundred books combined. The fact is, we have heard so much about the numbers of Bibles printed and circulated that we have almost come to think that buying a book and reading it are the same thing Do you recall the sentence pronounced upon Satan. "Dust shall thou eat all the days of thy life?" The Devil feeds upon dust. He feeds upon ashes. He said to Jesus: "Command that these stones be made bread." But Jesus answered, "Man shall not live by bread alone." Why should we feed upon ashes and call it bread? Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye into the waters. Harken diligenly unto me and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight its self in fatness." There is something exceedingly suggestive in the fact that the word Vanity is found 110 times in the Old Testament, and only three times in the New. I would like to lead you to the fountain of living waters. Every other brook runs dry. I was almost going to say that every other book runs dry. The greatest need of the Church of Christ today is a knowledge of the Scriptures. Cease feeding on ashes. Feed on the living bread which cometh down from heaven.

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