

BIBLE STUDY AND A MISSIONARY'S FIGHT FOR SPIRITUALITY — A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

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THIS article is largely an effort to summarize the writer's personal experiences in Bible study throughout some thirty years, one half of which have been spent in actual service on the mission field and the remainder either in preparation for this service or in duties incident to furloughs. As the various currents of one's life do not run in distinct channels, it is impossible to define clearly their relative force in determining the resultant flow. In this paper there has, therefore, been no premeditated attempt to be logical or to produce a balanced philosophy of spiritual growth. The story will be told as naturally and simply as possible, in the hope that its very concreteness may increase its usefulness to fellow-missionaries of a younger generation.

At the outset let us be reminded that in an environment largely materialistic in its outlook and practices the missionary stands as the exponent of the supremacy and eternal vitality of all that is spiritual. He has come, not primarily to promote organization, except in so far as he is convinced that he may thus make more permanent the ideals to which he has given his life. The medical missionary, for example, seeks to alleviate suffering, but chiefly that thus he may make plain the heart of the Gospel. The educational missionary is here not so much to train the mind as to propagate life. With the evangelistic missionary even his preaching is only a means to the end that men may know how to live Christ. But whatever the phase of work in which he may be engaged, the odds

are against the missionary. The comparative inaccessibility of congenial spiritual fellowship tends to make him lose heart or perhaps to grow careless. The pressure of many insistent claims on his time weighs him down. The practical atheism of the life about him appals him and may even becloud his vision of God. He is a rare soul indeed, if under such conditions he does not feel the downward pull of the unspiritual, nor often acknowledge in the confessional of his own heart his frequent failure to realize his spiritual ideals.

In reviewing my experiences in Bible study I discover that they are closely linked to those which mark my fight for spirituality. I am forced, therefore, to begin by seeking to analyse and define my changing conceptions of what spirituality is. In my earlier thinking, I believe I am right in saying, the emotional element was dominant. When I could feel the ecstasy of a given spiritual exercise, I was confident of having received 'a blessing.' But I discovered that such times of exalted feeling were not constant and that I could not reproduce them at will. This drove me to introspection and to a comparative study of my religious friends. I came to the conclusion that so far as I myself was concerned I did not have a naturally strong emotional temperament and that this accounted for many of my difficulties. As to my more emotionally inclined friends, I acknowledged their religious enthusiasm to have a contagious influence, yet I felt puzzled whenever I noted that any of them had periods of depression. On the whole it seemed to me that there was more strength and constancy in the religious lives of those who were less demonstrative. The years that have since intervened have strengthened this conviction, for as I pass in quick review the subsequent history of my early companions in the Christian life, they seem to me to have shown a lack of balance in later development which has more or less seriously interfered with their fullest usefulness. True, not all of the other type have apparently been more fruitful :

but for the most part they did not promise so much at the beginning. In fact I cannot see that the size of the emotional factor has held any direct ratio to the effective spirituality of any of the friends whom I have intimately known. Both experience and observation seemed to prove that spirituality, while enriched by the emotions when they are under control, so far transcends them that the presence or absence of feeling is no reliable evidence of the presence or absence of spirituality.

Gradually, then, I began to think of faithfulness as a better test for spirituality than feeling. This seemed to have in it the ring of the real. It was a source of untold satisfaction, for instance, to be able to count on the attendance of a certain few at the class prayer meeting, or the Tuesday night association hour, or the volunteer band meeting. Their faithfulness made me want to be faithful in attending such meetings. In my private devotional habits, too, I found satisfaction in regularity. At the age of nineteen I had the privilege of attending for the first time the Northfield Student Conference, and there learned of the 'morning watch' which became a new habit of my life. It became so much a part of my life that I would voluntarily permit nothing to interfere with its observance. While I never have regretted forming this 'morning watch' habit, and although it still is, I believe, the most fruitful part of my day's work, yet I needed to learn that I was placing undue emphasis on mere faithfulness in its observance. I was magnifying form above essence, and was aroused to a sense of the peril of my position by realizing that it was against this very sin that Jesus hurled His severest invectives. An extended period of physical inability to maintain my accustomed devotional practices helped me to recast my standards of relative values. Although I appreciate as keenly as ever I did the good which comes through right religious habits, I now realize that I must constantly be on my guard to prevent their becoming, even unconsciously, an end in themselves.

A reaction against formalism took the direction of a new emphasis on creed. Although I had early been taught a reverence for credal statements, having been trained in the Westminster catechism, it was only when I came to see how insecure a foundation was offered by mere faithfulness to the so-called 'means of grace,' that I was forced to search for other ground on which to stand. During this period, spirituality was to me something dominantly intellectual. There was great satisfaction in being able to discover new statements of old truths. It was positively exhilarating to find a new truth or to see an old truth in clearer outline. My Bible study, my devotional reading of other books, my enjoyment of church services, all found their chief attraction in the stimulus they offered to fresh thinking on religious themes. There came, however, two sets of experiences which tended to undermine this one-sided conception of the spiritual life. In the first place, I discovered that it was sometimes a little more difficult to get along with those about me after I had been deeply engrossed in religious thinking. My temper seemed less tolerant and sometimes quite irritable. This led to heart-searching and to the conclusion that I had been getting something else than pure spiritual culture. In the second place, I was again obliged to be comparatively inactive, this time for a longer period than before. During this period it was my privilege to live among the common people. This brought me to realize the depth and power of the spirituality of many who are not highly educated. I ought to have seen it in China sooner, but I had failed to know intimately enough the earnest lives of the humbler Chinese Christians with whom I had been partially acquainted. Here again I needed to be taught that while we cannot divorce thought and spirituality, nor be our best without loving God with all our minds, yet spirituality does not depend on the amount of brain power we have, nor the clearness of the credal statements we make.

The sequence to this reaction from intellectualism

in religion was the assumption that spirituality must surely then be essentially a matter of conduct. If it is not faith, it must be works. I had, of course, often been brought to realize that the spiritual life cannot grow where there is sin. I concluded, therefore, that where there is morality there must be spirituality. Here I thought I stood on solid ground, so gave myself to the study of the laws of character growth. My general reading was to a large extent devoted to character studies, as was also my Bible study. The story of Joseph had from my childhood greatly impressed me, but now I came to admire him more than ever as what seemed to me the most all-round character in the Old Testament. In my study of the life of Jesus at this time the entrancing element was the perfect balance of His wonderful character. So the Bible became a sketch-book of characters, good and bad, strong and weak, either for emulation or for warning. Even my prayer-life was affected by this point of view, becoming to a large degree the chief means of keeping the ideals of character growth clearly before me. A later realization, however, that the intercessory element in my prayers seemed to be weakening was, I think, the main factor in leading me to question the validity of the emphasis I was placing on character as the test of spirituality. As I thought through my doubts I saw that there were other forces than spirituality which also made for growth in character. There were men of sterling worth among my Chinese friends who yet had known or thought little of spiritual things. Education, environment and discipline of the will had produced in them a large fruitage of morality. I could, of course, see that there was something lacking in their moral standards and felt sure that the highest and best morals could not be produced apart from vital religion, and I found some of them ready to acknowledge the same. This only went to show, however, that spirituality, though it might be the richest, was not the only source of character development. I came to see that while spirituality must

ultimately result in growth in character, it may begin to show itself long before there has been much character developed and that there may be much character without any apparent spiritual life. A review of the Bible characters which I had been studying confirmed this new point of view. I saw that Peter was a weak character during the earlier years of his association with Jesus, but was at that very time more spiritually-minded, perhaps, than any of the other apostles: he seemed to lay hold on spiritual ideas more quickly than they all and was behind none in the ardour of his devotion. The woman who anointed Jesus had, even after her repentance, little to commend her from the moral standpoint, but she was unquestionably deeply spiritual. The thief on the cross had no previous character basis for his spirituality, but there is no doubting the reality of his religious life. I turned to the Old Testament, and there found standards of morality which are not tolerated by Christians to-day coupled with highly sensitive spiritual natures. Then looking into my own experience, I discovered that I was by no means always nearest God when I felt most conscious of having been upright. So I became convinced that to be good is not necessarily to be spiritual.

What then is spirituality? I dare not speak with too great confidence, for there are doubtless other stages through which I must yet go before I shall fully know. But as I look back over these experiences I can see emerging from time to time a far simpler conception of the spiritual life, which I seemed at times to grasp for a little while and then to lose in the confusion of other thoughts, only to rediscover it later in some unexpected way. It seems to me now that this simpler conception has come to stay, for it has borne every test I have yet given it and satisfies my inner cravings as no other conception of the spiritual life has ever satisfied. Let me share the process of thought whereby I sought to define it.

For outstanding examples of spirituality I looked to

Hagar, who in her hour of desperation found God near : to Abraham, who was called the friend of God : to Jacob, when he wrestled with God : to Moses, after the spiritual discipline of his long exile and the vision he saw in the burning bush : to Samuel, who early came to know God's voice : to Elijah, who possessed something which made him the strongest man in Israel : to Amos, who caught a vision under the stars of Tekoa which enabled him to put a new valuation on unseen forces : to Isaiah, when he was not afraid of Sennacherib's army : to John, who learned to lean on Jesus' bosom : to Paul, whose passion it was to know Christ and go with Him to the limit of possible suffering : and to a host of the pure in heart throughout the ages and in our own day who have lived by faith and not by sight. The recurrent factor in all these examples seemed to be a certain attitude of heart towards God, resulting in an intimacy of relation to Him.

For statements of the source of spirituality I turned to the familiar motto which Paul announced when he said that to him to live was Christ, and to the pregnant sayings of our Lord Himself, who clearly stated that He is the resurrection and the life and that He came that men might have life and have it abundantly. But these and similar words, which have so long been cherished in the memory, took on a new meaning when I began to see how it is that Jesus is our life. I saw that He came not merely to reveal God in the sense in which the prophets had revealed Him, but to show how close and personal the relation between God and man must really be. Hence it was that He said that it is eternal life to know the Father. And so, if for no other reason, He needed to make the sacrifice of His own life that we might know His valuation of the necessity of breaking the separating power of sin and regaining a complete fellowship with the Father whose love we had disregarded. The dominant impression He made on the lives of men was that He and the Father were one. He told us that none could know the Father but through

Himself, and sought to lead us to abide in Him that we might abide in the Father as did He. Hence it was that He assured us at the very last that He is always with us, and that it would be expedient for us that He go away so that through the presence of 'the promise of the Father' there might be no limitations of time or place or race to the intimacy that men might maintain with the Father through Him. Jesus Christ is, therefore, the source of a life of personal intimacy between the soul and the loving heavenly Father.

Our human friendships furnish an analogy which helps us to enter into this conception of spirituality. It is easy for us to know the attitude of our hearts towards individual fellow-men. The real intimacy of our relationships to our loved ones is not proven by the state of our emotions at the moment, nor by our faithfulness in the observance of any outward form of devotion, nor by our intellectual conceptions of those we love, nor by our own worthiness of their love. The only test is the attitude of our wills and theirs. In our relations with God we already know to a certainty that the attitude of His will towards us is one of loving friendship, so it only remains for us to test our attitude to Him and we shall know whether we are spiritually-minded or not. Do we yearn for His fellowship? Do we fly to Him as a child to its mother? Do we have a sense of security because we know He is near? Are we growing in our consciousness of His place in our lives and in the world? Do surprises startle and annoy us less than once they did? Do not these and similar questions furnish the primary test as to the reality and development of our spiritual lives?

As we follow this truth further we find that we cannot be friendly with God without being friendly with men. God has so identified Himself with mankind, and has made us so completely a part of the society in which we live, that we cannot be solitarily religious. The spiritual life must have its expression in vitalizing contacts with the

lives of those about us. The spiritual man cannot be a recluse. He must be a friendly brother to men if he is to be a friendly son of God. Thus it is that the 'Inasmuch as ye did it unto one of the least of these,' comes to be the ultimate proof of our devotion to God. The live wire is the one that has perfect connexions with the dynamo and shows its life by its ability to transmit power. The live soul is the one in personal, intimate contact with God and will exhibit its vitality in the life it propagates. The spiritual life, therefore, is essentially a life of personal relationship with God, expressing itself through personal relationships with men. The second test of spirituality then—second only to the primary test—is the spiritual fruitage our lives are bearing in the lives of others. By spiritual fruitage we must only mean the same thing we have been defining for ourselves. Do our lives make it easier for others to live in a relation of intimacy with God? Are we helping them to trust Him more fully and to keep in His presence more constantly?

Now comes the connexion between what we have been trying to say and Bible study: the influence of Bible study in the growth of the spiritual life of the missionary will be determined by the objective he has in view when he studies it, and this in turn will be largely influenced by his conception of the spiritual life. Again I can speak most truly only as I speak from my own experience.

For a long time the Bible was to me chiefly a storehouse of inspiring truths, which I used to discover, mark, and try to hold before me as mottoes. If my morning's reading did not unearth some gem, I felt my time lost. If after the discovery of a great thought it did not stir my feelings, I felt something had gone wrong. If later in the day I could not recall what I had thus learned at the beginning of the day I felt ashamed. I was then living in the emotional period of my religion.

Gradually my Bible study became more a matter of habit. I kept faithfully at it, whether it yielded a con-

scious uplift or not. I felt that the mere passing of the pure water of the Word through my mind would somehow suffice and that when the water had done its work it need no longer be visible. Bible study was a duty which I dared not neglect, although its fruitfulness was often not evident. I was living in the stage of faithfulness to outward form.

Then came the intellectual stage, when I sought to define my creed. This was a time when I found a new interest in Bible study, but as I have already confessed I realized ultimately that it did not always feed my soul. My attention was held by my desire to think through the problems before me, and this was by no means a fruitless enterprise. My only regret is that I often allowed the intellectual problems to overshadow my immediate spiritual need of a closer companionship with God.

The period when I found my chief interest in character study has already been described in sufficient detail. I need only add that although I received much inspiration from such study, and it often proved unconsciously the means of bringing me into a nearer relation with God, yet the latter result was rather the exception than the rule. I now feel that sometimes the very exaltation of the nobility of character tended to will worship and thus blunted the keen edge of my consciousness of need for divine power.

The difference between these four points of view regarding the spiritual life, and the simpler one I have tried to state, is clearly brought out in the effect of the latter on my method of studying the Bible.

The Bible appears as never before a real unit. To me it now seems primarily a first-hand record of God's attempts, from age to age, to make Himself known to man and of man's struggles to respond to these wooings of His Spirit. Anywhere one dips into this record one sees the heart of God exhibited. Man has been a slow pupil, so has been taught but one lesson at a time. His apprecia-

tion of God has progressed from generation to generation, hence differing requirements have been made of him. But all the way through it is the same God, yearning to become really understood and loved. Thus Job seems no longer chiefly a philosopher and debater, but an unequivocal witness to the faithfulness of the God to whom he clung to the last. Ruth is more than a beautiful story of human devotion: it typifies, as I believe it was originally meant to do, the attitude of God to any soul who cleaves to Him. The cruder beliefs and lower standards of some of the oldest characters take on new meaning, for they show how patient God was, how He revered man's individuality and moved only as fast with man as He could get man voluntarily to follow. In fact, the whole Old Testament takes on new meaning because it abounds in the personal experiences of men in their search for a basis of fellowship with God. It seems no longer a record of a dead past, but throbs with the same pulsations of life which I find about me and in me every day. And the New Testament seems to grow naturally out of the Old. The fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus becomes the absorbing theme, whether studied from the angle of the evangelists or of the apostles. All the way through both New and Old Testaments it is the same loving God, opening up His heart to men of varying capacities, and it is the same struggle between self and God in the heart of each individual, until he wins or loses in the fight.

The fact that the Bible has thus become to me a book of religious experiences sends me to it with a keen desire to get at the real significance of each experience. I cannot appreciate the story of Amos apart from the history of the time in which he lived, so every sidelight gives added zest to the search for the springs of his power with man and God. I cannot understand Luke apart from his association with Paul, so I read Paul's writings, especially those which he probably wrote when Luke was with him, to see whether I can interpret more fully his wonderful painting of the

portrait of God in Christ. I feel a debt of gratitude to devout students of the Bible, who by their persevering labour have made the setting of its messages clearer, but my interest in following them is no longer that of a mere student of history or literature, but grows out of a desire to understand God better and to become a truer child of His.

But lest I fall again into the mistake of giving pre-eminence to the intellectual satisfaction of understanding the message of the Bible, I keep recalling myself by the simple question, Is my study to-day helping me to become better acquainted with God, to feel more at home in His presence and to help others to understand and love Him more perfectly? I feel that if my Bible study does not spontaneously issue in the spirit of prayer I must be getting afield. Such Bible study as holds me in the presence of God seems to me a reliable antidote to the poisons which attack me from within and without. It lifts me out of the narrowing atmosphere of a circumscribed life and carries me as on eagle wings up to where God's plans seem clearer and His life closer. It keeps vividly before me my need of God and His yearnings towards me. It shows me what in my life is hindering the closest walk with Him and drives me to the only place where these hindrances can be overcome. Only such study can really contribute to my spiritual growth and make me spiritually helpful to those with whom I am associated.

All this does not mean that I undervalue regular habits of Bible study. Nor would I eliminate the spontaneous action of the emotions, or withhold one atom of the best concentration of thought of which I am capable, or be satisfied with any but the highest ideals of character. But the moment that any one of these valuable factors in effective Bible study becomes an end in itself, that moment I know I am in peril.

I may be pardoned for yet another personal illustration. My missionary mother still lives, and it is one of

the perennial joys of my life to await the arrival of her weekly message. No matter how seemingly trivial in its details, I pore over every line as well as what is between the lines, unwritten. Every such poring helps me to visualize my mother again and to realize how much I owe to her. It brings me into her spiritual presence and stimulates me to renew my devotion to her. In some such manner as this, though with an infinitely greater fullness, should my reading of the Bible serve to make the heavenly Father's presence ever more real to me, to arouse me to lay full hold on the opportunity to expand and deepen this the greatest and most eternal friendship of which I am capable, and to transmit the joy of that friendship to every human heart with which I am privileged to hold fellowship.

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