

Articles and Sermons :: The Comfort of the Scriptures by T.T. Shields

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The Comfort of the Scriptures

by T.T. Shields

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"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." - Romans 15:4

I SHALL SPEAK TO YOU for a little while this morning about the use of the Bible. It is represented in the above verse as a Book that has been Divinely produced, with a view to effecting certain Divine purposes. It is not the product of evolution, of the evolution of man's religious consciousness, nor is it the result of man's blind search after God; but It is written for a special purpose: "Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning."

Thus, human need has been fully anticipated and provided for in the Scriptures of truth. It is a remarkable fact that the Bible does not wear out. You have bought many books, and you have read more than you have bought. Very few of them have you read the second time, and some, perhaps, you have not been able to complete because of their want of interest. But the Bible is as a well that is never dry, a light that is never extinguished, a banqueting-table that is never exhausted of its dainties; It is always ministering and never wearing out.

And the reason is this: It has been especially prepared for our use; the things that are written here were "written aforetime for our learning." How reasonable it is that this should be so! How inspiring it is to read the record of Divine grace! How beautifully, how fully, how elaborately our gracious God furnished this earth for human habitation, so that when man was at last created and put in the garden, every possible provision had already been made for his every need. And even now, if I may dare to say so, we have not finished unpacking the trunk. It was long before man learned that God had stored away a supply of coal in the cellars of the world; and little by little, all through the centuries, men have been discovering how fully God has provided for human need.

After all, that is the function of true science - not "science falsely so-called" to go through this great house we call the world and discover its treasures which God has laid up for those who love Him. Once we thought we were very clever when we wired our houses and were able to talk to our neighbors without going out-of-doors. We considered it an extraordinarily clever thing to send the voice along a copper wire-but now we have learned that all that was provided for long before we knew anything about it, and we are almost ashamed of our wires now; for we have discovered that God has provided a medium through which we may talk thousands of miles without any wires at all. And by and by, when we have learned to articulate more clearly, we may be our own broadcasting machine and may be able to talk from continent to continent, and who knows but from planet to planet? Thus richly has this world been furnished, so that nothing we need is lacking.

Would it not be strange if He had made every provision for our need in the material world and yet had made no provision for our spiritual requirements? The mariner has something by which to guide his course: He has the pole star. There is also that mysterious something which no one understands and which we call the magnetic pole, by which the compass is directed, making it possible for men to make their way across the trackless deep. In fact, in every realm of life God has set up standards by which man may be guided and his life directed. I say, how strange it would have been had He not provided for the requirements of the soul! But just as our gracious God has furnished the world and provided for all our material need, so in the Scripture He has stored away everything we require for our learning in order that we may be the men and women we should be. It was written "aforetime" by Divine order, and by Divine prescience every possible requirement of the soul has been anticipated and provided for in this wonderful Book.

The Scriptures, then, were written for "our learning." The Book is to be our Teacher; the Book is to judge us - we are not to judge the Book. There is a world of difference between these two attitudes of approach. Nowadays it has become co

common for men to attempt to teach the Book. They turn to Genesis and go through every page of it and say, "I do not believe that ... and I do not believe that ... and I do not believe that." Poor blind souls they are, how little do they know that the Bible was written for our learning! It was intended to be our Teacher, and no man will ever get the wealth of wisdom and of grace here laid up for the believing soul who approaches it in that critical attitude. "He that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him." And it is equally true of the Word of God, that if you would get out of It that which God has put into It for you, you must come to It as to the Word of God: you must surrender your will to It; you must yield your intellect to It; you must let It search your heart; you must sit at Its feet as at the feet of a teacher.

That is perfectly reasonable, it is not? It is useless for me to go to a doctor and tell him how to heal me. If I were a doctor he would say, "Physician, heal thyself." If you will be your own adviser, do it yourself. If you are a master in any particular realm of knowledge, you do not go to anyone else for instruction; you go rather to a man who has specialized in some particular branch about which you yourself know little or nothing; and though you were a college professor or the author of an encyclopedia, in the particular branch of knowledge of which you are ignorant, you must go to a master and bow at his feet and say, "What shall I do?" The Bible is the Master. It is the word of Divine Wisdom; It tells of Him in Whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge reside. It is, indeed, the record of Him in Whom "dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." And all that is written herein is written for our instruction, that you may come to the Book as a humble pupil that you may learn therefrom that which He would have you know. It was written "aforetime for our learning"; but we shall learn from It only as we come to It in this teachable attitude.

If there are any here this morning who have never learned anything from the Scriptures. it is because you have never gone to school to the Scriptures. The Book is designed to teach us.

It teaches us, first of all, about ourselves. You will never learn what you are until you come to the Book. Here your portrait is properly drawn. The Bible will pay you no compliment; It will humble you in the dust. I remember somewhere reading of a young man who went to college. He was taken into the president's office, and the president said to him, "What do you know?" The young man replied, "I do not know anything, sir. I came here to learn." "Well," said the president, "that is very good in general terms; I suppose you mean that, but what schools have you attended? What credits have you?" "Nothing of which I am proud, sir," he said. "I have done such poor work that it is not worth mentioning. I have come here to learn." "But what have you read?" he was asked. "Oh, nothing worth speaking about." "Well, but have you read nothing at all?" "Of course, I have read a little, but nothing to what I ought to have read or should like to have read," was his reply. "And you know nothing?" "No, sir, nothing worth speaking of. I supposed the college existed to teach, so I have come to learn." The president took him by the hand and said, "Let me congratulate you, sir. You are three years in advance of the average student. It takes the average student three years to learn that he knows nothing."

Many people come to the Bible with the idea that they know everything -, but if you let It talk to you, you will discover what a great sinner you are. No one else will ever tell you that you are a sinner. They may tell you that you are not perfect, that there is something wrong; but the Bible will go right to the heart of the matter and leave you stripped, standing before God as a poor, helpless, bankrupt sinner. It was "written for our learning."

That is the one thing you and I need to learn first of all: how sinful, how utterly helpless we are. It is only because people do not know the nature of the disease called sin that they try to heal themselves. They think it is just a little human imperfection, something that can be sloughed off. But the Bible tells you there is something wrong with the heart: "Every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" -, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked", that the will is corrupt: "We have turned every one to his own way"; that the intellect is against God: "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the will of God, neither indeed can be"; that the memory is evil and retains that which is evil and not good; that the "whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores." That is what the Bible tells us, and that is what we need to learn.

Further. the Bible will teach us about others. It is more important that we should know about ourselves. There are some people who know a great deal about other people. I knew a man who said he was always rather suspicious of people who were supremely concerned about other people's sins. There are people who are expert in judging other people's sins; but the Bible will tell you what you are, and then It will tell you that you are just one of a class, and that all have sinned. It will cure you of a hundred evils to which men give themselves who do not believe the Bible to be true.

Then we shall learn from the Bible of God Himself, who He is. The Scriptures "were written for our learning." We shall learn that He hears the cry of the human soul, that He gave His Son to die for our sins, that He comes to the help of the

elpless, that He has compassion on the poor, that He gives energy to the one who is being defeated. We shall know something of His holiness, something of His mercy, His grace, His power. It was written "for our learning."

Certain people say, in effect, "It is no longer possible for us to unite on the Bible, but we may unite on the person of Christ"! But what does anybody know of "the Person of Christ" apart from the Bible? This, my friends, is the record, from Genesis to Revelation, that God has given us of His Son; and "whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning" that we might learn of God. And you cannot learn about God anywhere else. The only God we know is the God who is revealed in the Person of Jesus Christ, and the only record we have of Christ is in this inspired Book, so that we are shut up for our knowledge of ourselves and of our fellows - yes, and I think, had I time to develop it, I could show you that you are shut up to a knowledge of the world about you as well as to a knowledge of God, to the Scriptures of truth. I do not believe that any man can be a true scientist - I do not believe any man can discern the ultimate truth in any realm - unless he approaches the study of that subject through the light of the Scriptures. The message of God in nature is really known only to those whose minds are illuminated by the Holy Spirit, just as truly as the message of God in the Book can only be known by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, we know nothing - we have no knowledge of truth in the absolute in respect to any realm - apart from the written Word. We are dependent upon God to tell us the truth for time and for eternity, written in this Book for our learning.

Let us now observe why the Scriptures were written: "That we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." The Bible is given to us that thereby, or therefrom, we may learn patience and receive comfort. Is there anyone here who does not need to learn patience? The fact that the days of our years are three score and ten and that we are subject to the limitations of time and space inevitably makes us impatient. It is not possible for a man to be patient who sees only temporal things. Patience, in the true sense, is possible only to one who gets the perspective of eternity. You can never be patient until you learn to look at things through God's eyes. The little boy to whom his father says, "Not today, my son, perhaps tomorrow," says, "Will tomorrow ever come?" "Not this Christmas, my lad, perhaps next Christmas." "Next Christmas! Why, that is an eternity!" I remember when I was a little boy I used to feel that the day after Christmas was the nearest thing to nothing that anything could possibly be because the next Christmas was so far away! For a child to be told to wait is to inflict upon him a hard discipline because he looks at things from a child's point of view.

We can get a glimpse of this truth through the things that come to us through the years. There are men and women here this morning saying, "When I was young I wanted things done now-Now-NOW; but as the years multiplied, I learned how to wait." But it is the hardest thing in the world to wait-wait-wait, and be patient.

Why were the Scriptures written? Why were they given to us? That we might learn to be patient, that we might come to look at things from the standpoint of One who, in respect of time, is a Multimillionaire. God always has plenty of time; He never is before His time, and He never is too late. Let me tell you what I think is wrapped up in this simple text. Take the case of Abraham. He was a man subject to like passions as we are, subject to all our limitations. He is told to leave his country and go out to a land that he has never seen. He obeys, and when he is brought to that land, God tells him that He will give him the land but that He will give it to him in his seed, saying, "I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice." God makes him a great promise, and already the promise involves a miracle, for Abraham has reached the evening-time of his life and has no son; and then after He has made the promise, for perhaps over twenty years, he is kept waiting. Do you not suppose Abraham became impatient? But he had to learn how God fulfills His own plans and purposes, and in due time Isaac was born. And God told Abraham a strange thing in that period of darkness - you remember the thick darkness that came upon him? - the Lord told Abraham that his seed should go down into Egypt, that they would be there four hundred years, and after that He would judge that nation and bring them out into liberty. Only when we get the Divine standpoint can we count in terms of centuries and millenniums. Men say, "I have only a few years to live. It must be now or never; let me have any good things I am to have now." The Lord said to Abraham, "Be patient, and I will fulfill My plan to you by and by; by and by, My word will be fulfilled."

We come into Exodus, and there we see Moses eager to get at his work, just like some young men who cannot wait for preparation. He wants to get into it at once, "for he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them." But the Lord said to Moses, "You need a college course that will occupy you forty years. Go back to the wilderness to school"; and He sends Moses back forty years to get that impulsiveness corrected and to learn to have patience to await God's time.

So I could take you all through the Book, but I must be content with but one other case. It is written of David: "And it came to pass, when the king sat in his house, and the Lord had given him rest round about from all his enemies; that the king

g said unto Nathan the prophet, 'See now, I dwell in an house of cedar, but the ark of God dwelleth within curtains - I will build God a house, and I will do it at once.' And Nathan replied, "Go, do all that is in thine heart." But when the preacher got home, the Lord talked with him and said, "Go and tell my servant David, 'Thus saith the Lord, Shalt thou build Me an house for Me to dwell in? ... I will appoint a place for My people Israel and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them any more as beforetime.' Go and tell David that I do not want him to build Me a house: tell him that I am going to build him a house. And then the Lord drew the curtains, and David looked down through the centuries and said, "Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house that Thou hast brought me hitherto? And this was yet a small thing in Thy sight, O Lord God; but Thou hast spoken also of Thy servant's house for a great while to come. And is this the manner of man, O Lord God?" And instead of praying for this house of cedar that he had wanted to build, he began to pray that the purposes of God might be fulfilled in that great while to come.

David, like Abraham, learned something of God in those experiences. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day: and he saw it and was glad." It was as though God said, "Patience, Abraham, patience. It is not Isaac of whom I speak; certainly it is not Ishmael; but look down through the years, let the centuries unroll and can you not see it?" At last Abraham got a glimpse of Christ, and he knew that when God said, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed," He was really selecting Abraham as the progenitor, after the flesh, of the Messiah. "For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

Can you be patient a little while? "And comfort" - for you cannot have patience without comfort. The word comfort is an old word. It did not mean, as used here, what we mean by that word today. We think of a comforter as one who comes to allay one's grief, exercising a tender, compassionate ministry; but the word here really comes from the same root as the word Comforter, the Paraclete, one who comes to stand by or alongside, "that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." We can have comfort only as God is alongside, to comfort. Go back through the Book, begin with Eve when the promise of the Conquering Seed is given, and come on down through the Book, and you will see that to every soul to whom God spake, bidding them to be patient, He gave the promise that He would stand by to gird them with His strength.

You must think this through for yourselves. Had I time I should like to inquire of every one of you: In what sphere of life do you need patience and comfort? In your family life? You will find it in the Book. In your business? You will find it here. In any other realm of life? You will find it here. In the national sphere? In the international realm? You will always find the example in the Book of how God wrought patience and comfort in the hearts of His people; and it is written there for our learning, that what God has done for others, He can do for us, "that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

Some of you have what you call a "promise-box." I confess that I do not share your enthusiasm for them, this taking out a promise in a hop-skip-and-jump fashion. God's Word is always true. Someone says, "My verse today was so-and-so." Well, what did the verse do for you? "It inspired me; it was a kind of motto. I put it up before me, I turned it over in my mind, and it helped me." And so the Scripture was to you something objective, a sort of idea, or ideal, and had a certain psychological reaction upon yourself. Then you say, "If the Lord said, 'I will never leave thee,' well, I say that over to myself, and then I believe it." Is that all? The Bible says, "Through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" - how do the Scriptures work patience and comfort in the believing heart? There is something vastly more than a psychological effect; there is a direct spiritual action on the soul of man if we properly use our Book. As for example, when Jesus Christ said to the leper, "I will, be thou clean," did He give him a motto so that the leper said all day, "The Lord said, 'I will, be thou clean,' and I will believe it"? No! The Lord Jesus Christ said, "I will, be thou clean," and that word conveyed power, and instantly he was clean. It was the same word that commanded the worlds from nought; it was the same voice that said, "Let there be light," and there was light; it was the same word that said, "Let the earth bring forth," and it did as it was told. When we receive the Scripture, are we merely to hang Scripture text mottos on the wall? Or, are we to believe them for what they really are, the very Word of God, and to receive instantly all that God wants us to have and all that He promises to give us?

Think of that great promise, "My grace is sufficient for thee." I read of one years ago being in his study in great distress, in the face of some difficult situation. He cried, "O Lord, let Thy grace be sufficient for me." He lifted his eyes, and the very text he had been pleading was hanging on his wall; and he said, by the touch of God, that one little phrase seemed to blaze like an electric sign; and God said, "My grace is sufficient for thee." And that preacher was able to rise from his knees with an accession of power, for God had given him His Word. What do we need? Forgiveness of sin? Then take it; claim it. It is conveyed; it is conferred to us through His Spirit. Do you need sanctifying power to break the chains that bind? Expect that God will exercise that power to break the chains and set the prisoner free. The "exceeding great and pr

ecious promises" are given us that by these we might be able to follow after the Divine ideal, that with these great promises before us we might aspire to endeavor to approximate God's purposes for us - is that what it says? No! - "that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust." Hence, patience becomes, not something that is superimposed, but something that is wrought in the soul, as an inherent quality of the soul; not a crutch or a prop, but a new power in the heart. Even as Moses endured "as seeing Him who is invisible," man begins all over again. The Scripture says, "Ye must be born again," and he is born again; patience and comfort become a part of him; and in the measure in which he appropriates the promises, in that measure will he grow up into Christ in all things.

That we "might have hope." When hope departs, the man is dead. "We are saved by hope." There are men and women here this morning facing certain things tomorrow, or finding themselves in a particular condition today, and if you believed that condition would continue indefinitely, you could not live; but you are living in hope that the cloud will be lifted, that the winter will pass and that the springtime will come again into your life. "We are saved by hope." I do not know where to find hope apart from the Bible; I, at least, apart from that Book, am utterly hopeless, for I have tried myself so often. And I know there is no human hand that can help me, but "through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" I have hope that at some day I shall be without fault before the throne of God. I do not know how it can be, that is the miracle of all miracles; but I know that it will be because it is in the Book. And I have hope of being like Him some day.

There are a great many people round about me for whom I have no hope. Please do not ask me to nurse them; I do not know how to do it. There are some people who are very difficult to help. I have no hope for them apart from God; but I know "through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" they can be changed.

We live in dark days for the Church. I read an article some years ago in The Forum, written by a Chinese on the Chinese situation, in which he said that Christianity had reached an end in China-absolutely the end. It had done good in the past, but, like other religions, it had to give place to other systems. Among other things, he said that this was due to the wave of rationalism that had spread from the Chinese universities. In other words, while there are Christian missionaries that have stood for the faith, there are other religions that have built schools in China and have sent out men who have taught China to reject the Word of God and, in the name of the Christian religion, almost the very foundations of the work in China have been destroyed by this accursed Modernism for which Christian people are foolish enough to pay.

Everywhere you find it. Somebody comes to me and says, "I am going to a certain city; can you tell me where I can go so that I may hear the Gospel of salvation?" Someone asked me that of a certain American city the other day, and I had to answer this: "I do not know; I have no doubt the Lord has His witnesses, that there are groups of people, smaller churches perhaps, where faithful witness is home to the truth; but so far as the outstanding Baptist churches in that city are concerned, you had better stay away from them." Frankly, in that city I do not know of one that is not a disseminator of poison. Any man who says it is not dark is a blind man and has never seen the light of God's Word. It is easy to put your head in the sand like the ostrich and say things are progressing. Something called religion is progressing, but the pure undiluted Gospel of God's grace is not very generally preached. What shall we do? "Through patience and comfort of the Scriptures" we may have hope. I remember that a nation of slaves was born into freedom in a day; I remember that while they sat down by the rivers of Babylon and wept when they remembered Zion, and hung their harps in the willows, yet in the midst of it all there came a time when the ransomed of the Lord returned; there came a great revival, and Israel was restored. All down through the centuries there have been dark days, but God has shone through. Someone says, "But what if this be the darkest and the last?" Well, the darkness will be dispelled, and "the Sun of righteousness will arise with healing in His wings." So we can live in that glorious hope. "We are saved by hope" - hope for ourselves, hope for the Church of Christ, hope for everybody, because the whole creation is some day to be "delivered into the glorious liberty of the children of God." It is all in the Scriptures. May God help us to use them more.