

Charlotte Mason on Bible Study

Excerpted from *Home Education*, pp. 245-253

Taken from the original text (errors and all).

XIV. —Bible Lessons

Children Enjoy the Bible.

We are apt to believe that children cannot be interested in the Bible unless its pages be watered down—turned into the slipshod English we prefer to offer them. Here is a suggestive anecdote of the childhood of Mrs Harrison, one of the pair of little Quaker maidens introduced to us in the *Autobiography of Mary Howitt*, the better known of the sisters. “One day she found her way into a lumber room. There she caught sight of an old Bible and turning over its yellow leaves she came upon words that she had not heard at the usual morning readings, the opening chapters of St Luke—which her father objected to read aloud—and the closing chapter of Revelation. The exquisite picture of the Great Child’s birth in the one chapter and the beauty of the description of the New Jerusalem in the other, were seized upon by the eager little girl of six years old with a rapture which, she used to say, no novel in after years ever produced.”

And here is a mention of a child of five. “The little ones read every day the events of Holy Week with me. Z. is inexpressibly interesting in his deep, reverent interest, almost excitement.” We are probably quite incapable of measuring the religious receptivity of children. Nevertheless, their fitness to apprehend the deep things of God is a fact with which we are called to ‘deal prudently,’ and to deal reverently. And that, because, as none can appreciate more fully than the ‘Darwinian,’ the attitude of thought and feeling in which you place a child is the vital factor in his education.

Should know the Bible Text.

Children between the ages of six and nine should get a considerable knowledge of the Bible text. By nine they should have read the simple (and suitable) narrative portions of the Old Testament, and, say, two of the gospels. The Old Testament should, for various reasons, be read to the children. The gospel stories they might be read for themselves as soon as they can read them beautifully. It is a mistake to use paraphrases of the text; the fine roll of Bible English appeals to children with a compelling music, and they will probably retain through life their first conception of the Bible scenes, and, also, the very words in which these scenes are portrayed. This is a great possession. Half the clever talk we hear to-day, and half the uneasiness which underlies this talk, are due to a thorough and perfect ignorance of the Bible text. The points of assault are presented to men’s minds naked and jagged, without atmosphere, perspective, proportion; until the Bible comes to mean for many, the speaking of Balaam’s ass or the standing still of the sun at Joshua’s bidding.

But let the imaginations of children be stored with the pictures, their minds nourished upon the words, of the gradually unfolding story of the Scriptures, and they will come to look out upon a wide horizon within which persons and events take shape in their due place and due proportion. By degrees, they will see that the world is a stage whereon the goodness of God is continually striving with the wilfulness of man; that some heroic men take sides with God; and that others, foolish and headstrong, oppose themselves to Him. The fire of enthusiasm will kindle in their breast, and the children, too, will take their side, without much exhortation, or any thought or talk of spiritual experience.

Essential and Accidental Truth.

As for whether such and such a narrative be a myth, or a parable, or a circumstance that has actually occurred, such questions do not affect the sincere mind of a child, because they have nothing to do with the main issues. It is quite well to bring before children, in the course of their Bible readings, whatever new light modern research puts in our way; the more we can help them in this way, the more vivid and real will Bible teaching become to them. But this grace, at any rate, the children may claim at our hands, that they shall not be disturbed by questions of authenticity in their Bible reading any more than in their reading of English history. Let them hear the story of the Garden of Eden, for example, as it stands; just so, we might even let them have the story of the man who went fishing and found a goodly pearl; and this, because the thing that matters in both stories is the essential truths they embody, and not the mere accidents of time and place. It is conceivable that the 'pearl of great price' was matter of current talk at the time; a so-called 'fact' seized upon by our Lord to make of it the vehicle for essential truth. If we will believe it, the minds of children are, perhaps, more fit than our own to appropriate and deal with truth. By-and-by they will perceive and discard, if necessary, the accidental circumstances with which the truth is clothed upon; but let us be very chary of our own action. Let us remember that neither we nor the children can bear the white light of naked truth; that if, for example, we succeed in destroying the clothing that covers the story of the first fall—the tree and its fruit, the tempting serpent, the yielding woman—we have no other clothing at hand for the fundamental truths of responsibility, temptation, sin; and, once uncovered, with no vesture which we can lay hold upon, the truths themselves will assuredly slip from our grasp.

We need not be at the pains to discriminate, in teaching children Bible narratives, between essential and accidental truth—the truth which interprets our own lives, and that which concerns only the time, place, and circumstances proper to the narrative. The children themselves will discern and keep fast hold of the essential, while the merely accidental slips from their memory as from ours. Therefore, let the minds of young children be well stored with the beautiful narratives of the Old Testament and of the gospels; but, in order that these stories may be always fresh and delightful to them, care must be taken lest Bible teaching stale upon their minds. Children are more capable of being bored than even we ourselves and many a revolt has been

brought about by the undue rubbing-in of the Bible, in season and out of season, even in nursery days. But we are considering, not the religious life of children, but their education by lessons; and their Bible lessons should help them to realise in early days that the knowledge of God is the principal knowledge, and, therefore, that their Bible lessons are their chief lessons.

Method of Bible Lessons.

The method of such lessons is very simple. Read aloud to the children a few verses covering if possible, an episode. Read reverently, carefully, and with just expression. Then require the children to narrate what they have listened to as nearly as possible in the words of the Bible. It is curious how readily they catch the rhythm of the majestic and simple Bible English. Then, talk the narrative over with them in the light of research and criticism. Let the teaching, moral and spiritual, reach them without much personal application. I know of no better help in the teaching of young children than we get in Canon Paterson *Smyth's Bible for the Young*. Mr. Smyth brings both modern criticism and research to bear, so that children taught from his little manuals will not be startled to be told that the world was not made in six days; and, at the same time, they will be very sure that the world was made by God. The moral and spiritual teaching in these manuals is on broad and convincing lines. It is rather a good plan occasionally to read aloud Mr. Smyth's lesson on the subject after the Bible passage has been narrated. Children are more ready to appropriate lessons that are not directly leveled at themselves; while the teacher makes the teaching her own by the interest with which she reads, the pictures and other illustrations she shows, and her conversational remarks.

[For a sample of Patterson Smyth's books go to
<www.amblesideonline.org/CM/PatersonSmith.html>.]

Picture Illustrations.

The pictures in the *Illustrated New Testament* are, at the same time, reverent and actual, an unusual combination, and children enjoy them greatly. It would be well for them to have only the penny gospel they are reading, but it should perhaps be protected (and honoured) by an embroidered cover. A tattered Bible is not a wholesome sight for children. *The Holy Gospels with Illustrations from the Old Masters*, published by the S.P.C.K. [Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; an Anglican mission organisation founded in 1698.], is admirable. The study of such pictures as are here reproduced should be a valuable part of a child's education; it is no slight thing to realise how the Nativity and the visit of the Wise Men filled the imagination of the early Masters, and with what exceeding reverence and delight they dwelt upon every detail of the sacred story. This sort of impression is not to be had from any up-to-date treatment, or up-to-date illustrations; and the child who gets it in early days, will have a substratum of reverent feeling upon which should rest his faith. But it is well to let the pictures tell their own tale. The children should study a subject quietly for a few minutes; and then, the picture being removed, say what they have seen in it. It will be found that they miss no little reverent or suggestive detail which the artist has thought well to include.

The various R.T.S. publications issued in the series of *Bypaths of Bible Knowledge* will be found very helpful by the teacher as illustrating modern research; notably, Professor Sayce's *Fresh Light from Ancient Monuments*, and Budge's *Dwellers on the Nile*.

Bible Recitations.

The learning by heart of Bible passages should begin while the children are quite young, six or seven. It is a delightful thing to have the memory stored with beautiful, comforting, and inspiring passages, and we cannot tell when and how this manner of seed may spring up, grow, and bear fruit; but the learning of the parable of the Prodigal son, for example, should not be laid on the children as a burden. The whole parable should be read to them in a way to bring out its beauty and tenderness; and then, day by day, the teacher should recite a short passage, perhaps two or three verses, saying it over some three or four times until the children think they know it. Then, but not before, let them recite the passage. Next day the children will recite what they have already learned, and so on, until they are able to say the whole parable.