

See last page.

THE BIBLE AND PROGRESS

ADDRESS OF
HON. WOODROW WILSON
GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY
IN THE AUDITORIUM, DENVER, COLO.

ON THE OCCASION OF THE
TERCENTENARY CELEBRATION OF THE
TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO
THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

MAY 7, 1911

M

BS472

.W5

1911a

THE BIBLE AND PROGRESS

By WOODROW WILSON

The thought that entered my mind first as I came into this great room this evening framed itself in a question—Why should this great body of people have come together upon this solemn night? There is nothing here to be seen. There is nothing delectable here to be heard. Why should you run together in a great host when all that is to be spoken of is the history of a familiar book?

But as I have sat and looked upon this great body of people I have thought of the very suitable circumstance that here upon the platform sat a little group of ministers of the gospel lost in this great throng.

I say the "suitable circumstance," for I come here to-night to speak of the Bible as the book of the people, not the book of the minister of the gospel, not the special book of the priest from which to set forth some occult, unknown doctrine withheld from the common understanding of men, but a great book of revelation—the people's book of revelation. For it seems to me that the Bible has revealed the people to themselves. I wonder how many persons in this great audience realize the significance for English-speaking peoples of the translation of the Bible into the English tongue. Up to the time of the translation of the Bible into English, it was a book for long ages withheld from the perusal of the peoples of other languages and of other tongues, and not a little of the history of liberty lies in the circumstance that the moving sentences of this book were made familiar to the ears and the understanding of those peoples who have led mankind in exhibiting the forms of government and the impulses of reform which have made for freedom and for self-government among mankind.

For this is a book which reveals men unto themselves, not as creatures in bondage, not as men under human authority, not as those bidden to take counsel and command of any human source. It reveals every man to himself as a distinct moral agent, responsible not to men, not even to those men whom he has put over him in authority, but responsible through his own conscience to his Lord and Maker. Whenever a man sees this vision he stands up a free man, whatever may be the government under which he lives. If he sees beyond the circumstances of his own life.

I heard a very eloquent sermon to-day from an honored gentleman who is with us to-night. He was speaking upon the effect of a knowledge of the future life upon our conduct in this life. And it seemed to me that as I listened to him I saw the flames of those fires rekindled at

Gift

Democratic

Nat. Comm.

ca. 16.12

E.W.F. Sept. 16-12.

which the martyrs died—died forgetful of their pain, with praise and thanksgiving upon their lips, that they had the opportunity to render their testimony that this was not the life for which they had lived, but that there was a house builded in the heavens, not built of men but built of God, to the vision of which they had lifted their eyes as they passed through the world, which gave them courage to fear no man but to serve God. And I thought that all the records of heroism of the great things that had illustrated human life were summed up in the power of men to see that vision.

Our present life, ladies and gentlemen, is a very imperfect and disappointing thing. We do not judge our own conduct in the privacy of our own closets by the standard of expediency by which we are daily and hourly governed. We know that there is a standard set for us in the heavens, a standard revealed to us in this book which is the fixed and eternal standard by which we judge ourselves, and as we read this book it seems to us that the pages of our own hearts are laid open before us for our own perusal. This is the people's book of revelation, revelation of themselves not alone, but revelation of life and of peace. You know that human life is a constant struggle. For a man who has lost the sense of struggle, life has ceased.

I believe that my confidence in the judgment of the people in matters political is based upon my knowledge that the men who are struggling are the men who know; that the men who are in the midst of the great effort to keep themselves steady in the pressure and rush of life are the men who know the significance of the pressure and the rush of life, and that they, the men on the make, are the men to whom to go for your judgments of what life is and what its problems are. And in this book there is peace simply because we read here the object of the struggle. No man is satisfied with himself as the object of the struggle.

There is a very interesting phrase that constantly comes to our lips which we perhaps do not often enough interpret in its true meaning. We see many a young man start out in life with apparently only this object in view—to make name and fame and power for himself, and there comes a time of maturity and reflection when we say of him, "He has come to himself." When may I say that I have come to myself? Only when I have come to recognize my true relations with the rest of the world. We speak of a man losing himself in a desert. If you reflect a moment you will see that is the only thing he has not lost. He himself is there. What he means when he says that he has lost himself is that he has lost all the rest of the world. He has nothing to steer by. He does not know where any human habitation lies. He does not know where any beaten path and highway is. If he could establish his relationship with anything else in the world he would have found himself. Let it serve as a picture.

7 of 8554
TTC

A man has found himself when he has found his relation to the rest of the universe, and here is the book in which those relations are set forth. And so when you see a man going along the highways of life with his gaze lifted above the road, lifted to the sloping ways in front of him, then be careful of that man and get out of his way. He

3

knows the kingdom for which he is bound. He has seen the revelation of himself and of his relations to mankind. He has seen the revelations of his relation to God and his Maker and therefore he has seen his responsibility in the world. This is the revelation of life and of peace. I do not know that peace lies in constant accommodation. I was once asked if I would take part in a great peace conference, and I said, "Yes, if I may speak in favor of war"—not the war which we seek to avoid, not the senseless and useless and passionate shedding of human blood, but the only war that brings peace, the war with human passions and the war with human wrong—the war which is that untiring and unending process of reform from which no man can refrain and get peace.

No man can sit down and withhold his hands from the warfare against wrong and get peace out of his acquiescence. The most solid and satisfying peace is that which comes from this constant spiritual warfare, and there are times in the history of nations when they must take up the crude instruments of bloodshed in order to vindicate spiritual conceptions. For liberty is a spiritual conception, and when men take up arms to set other men free, there is something sacred and holy in the warfare. I will not cry "Peace" so long as there is sin and wrong in the world. And this great book does not teach any doctrine of peace so long as there is sin to be combated and overcome in one's own heart and in the great moving force of human society.

And so it seems to me that we must look upon the Bible as the great charter of the human soul—as the "Magna Charta" of the human soul. You know the interesting circumstances which gave rise to the Magna Charta. You know the moving scene that was enacted upon the heath at Runnymede. You know how the barons of England, representing the people of England—for they consciously represented the people of England—met upon that historic spot and parleyed with John, the king. They said: "We will come to terms with you here." They said: "There are certain inalienable rights of English-speaking men which you must observe. They are not given by you, they cannot be taken away by you. Sign your name here to this parchment upon which these rights are written and we are your subjects. Refuse to put your name to this document and we are your sworn enemies. Here are our swords to prove it."

The franchise of human liberty made the basis of a bargain with a king! There are kings upon the pages of Scripture, but do you think of any king in Scripture as anything else than a mere man? There was the great king David, of a line blessed because the line from which should spring our Lord and Savior, a man marked in the history of mankind as the chosen instrument of God to do justice and exalt righteousness in the people.

(But) what does this Bible do for David? Does it utter eulogies upon him? Does it conceal his faults and magnify his virtues? Does it set him up as a great statesman would be set up in a modern biography? No, the book in which his annals are written strips the mask from David, strips every shred of counterfeit and concealment from him and shows him as indeed, an instrument of God, but a sinful and

4

selfish man, and the verdict of the Bible is that David, like other men, was one day to stand naked before the judgment seat of God and be judged not as a king, but as a man. / Isn't this the book of the people? Is there any man in this Holy Scripture who is exempted from the common standard and judgment? How these pages teem with the masses of mankind! Are these the annals of the great? These are the annals of the people—of the common run of men.

The New Testament is the history of the life and the testimony of common men who rallied to the fellowship of Jesus Christ and who by their faith and preaching remade a world that was under the thrall of the Roman army. This is the history of the triumph of the human spirit, in the persons of humble men. And how many sorts of men march across the pages, how infinite is the variety of human circumstance and of human dealings and of human heroism and love! Is this a picture of extraordinary things? This is a picture of the common life of mankind. It is a mirror held up for men's hearts, and it is in this mirror that we marvel to see ourselves portrayed.

How like to the Scripture is all great literature! What is it that entrances us when we read or witness a play of Shakespeare? It is the consciousness that this man, this all-observing mind, saw men of every cast and kind as they were in their habits as they lived. And as passage succeeds passage we seem to see the characters of ourselves and our friends portrayed by this ancient writer, and a play of Shakespeare is just as modern to-day as upon the day it was penned and first enacted. And the Bible is without age or date or time. It is a picture of the human heart displayed for all ages and for all sorts and conditions of men. Moreover, the Bible does what is so invaluable in human life—it classifies moral values. It apprises us that men are not judged according to their wits, but according to their characters.

That the last of every man's reputation is his truthfulness, his squaring his conduct with the standards that he knew to be the standards of purity and rectitude.

How many a man we appraise, ladies and gentlemen, as great to-day, whom we do not admire as noble! A man may have great power and small character. And the sweet praise of mankind lies not in their admiration of the smartness with which the thing was accomplished, but in that lingering love which apprises men that one of their fellows has gone out of life to his own reckoning, where he is sure of the blessed verdict: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Did you ever look about you in any great city, in any great capitol, at the statues which have been erected in it? To whom are these statues erected? Are they erected to the men who have piled fortunes about them? I do not know of any such statue anywhere unless after he had accumulated his fortune the man bestowed it in beneficence upon his fellowmen and alongside of him will stand a statue of another meaning, for it is easy to give money away. I heard a friend of mine say that the standard of generosity was not the amount you gave away, but the amount you had left. It is easy to give away of your abundance, but look at the next statue, the next statue and the next in the market-place of great cities and whom will you see? You will see

5

here a soldier who gave his life to serve, not his own ends, but the interests and the purposes of his country.

I would be the last, ladies and gentlemen, to disparage any of the ordinary occupations of life, but I want to ask you this question: Did you ever see anybody who had lost a son hang up his yardstick over the mantel-piece? Have you not seen many families who had lost their sons hang up their muskets and their swords over the mantel-piece? What is the difference between the yardstick and the musket? There is nothing but perfect honor in the use of the yardstick, but the yardstick was used for the man's own interest, for his own self-support. It was used merely to fulfill the necessary exigencies of life, whereas the musket was used to serve no possible purpose of his own. He took every risk without any possibility of profit. The musket is the symbol of self-sacrifice and the yardstick is not. A man will instinctively elevate the one as the symbol of honor and never dream of using the other as a symbol of distinction.

Doesn't that cut pretty deep, and don't you know why the soldier has his monument as against the civilian's. The civilian may have served his State—he also—and here and there you may see a statesman's statue, but the civilian has generally served his country—has often served his country, at any rate—with some idea of promoting his own interests, whereas the soldier has everything to lose and nothing but the gratitude of his fellowmen to win.

Let every man pray that he may in some true sense be a soldier of fortune, that he may have the good fortune to spend his energies and his life in the service of his fellowmen in order that he may die to be recorded upon the rolls of those who have not thought of themselves but have thought of those whom they served. Isn't this the lesson of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Am I not reminding you of these common judgments of our life, simply expounding to you this book of revelation, this book which reveals the common man to himself, which strips life of its disguises and its pretenses and elevates those standards by which alone true greatness and true strength and true valor are assessed?

Do you wonder, therefore, that when I was asked what my theme this evening would be I said it would be "The Bible and Progress"? We do not judge progress by material standards. America is not ahead of the other nations of the world because she is rich. Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of judgment which are written large upon these pages of revelation. America has all along claimed the distinction of setting this example to the civilized world—that men were to think of one another, that governments were to be set up for the service of the people, that men were to be judged by these moral standards which pay no regard to rank or birth or conditions, but which assess every man according to his single and individual value. This is the meaning of this charter of the human soul. This is the standard by which men and nations have more and more come to be judged. And so the form has consisted in nothing more nor less than this—in trying to conform actual conditions, in trying to square actual

laws with the right judgments of human conduct and more than liberty.

That is the reason that the Bible has stood at the back of progress. That is the reason that reform has come not from the top but from the bottom. If you are ever tempted to let a government reform itself, I ask you to look back in the pages of history and find me a government that reformed itself. If you are ever tempted to let a party attempt to reform itself I ask you to find a party that ever reformed itself.

A tree is not nourished by its bloom and by its fruit. It is nourished by its roots, which are down deep in the common and hidden soil, and every process of purification and rectification comes from the bottom—not from the top. It comes from the masses of struggling human beings. It comes from the instinctive efforts of millions of human hearts trying to beat their way up into the light and into the hope of the future.

Parties are reformed and governments are corrected by the impulses coming out of the hearts of those who never exercised authority and never organized parties. Those are the sources of strength, and I pray God that these sources may never cease to be spiritualized by the immortal subjections of these words of inspiration of the Bible.

If any statesman sunk in the practices which debase a nation will but read this single book he will go to his prayers abashed. Do you not realize, ladies and gentlemen, that there is a whole literature in the Bible? It is not one book, but a score of books. Do you realize what literature is? I am sometimes sorry to see the great classics of our English literature used in the schools as text-books, because I am afraid that little children may gain the impression that these are formal lessons to be learned. There is no great book in any language, ladies and gentlemen, that is not the spontaneous outpouring of some great mind or the cry of some great heart. And the reason that poetry moves us more than prose does is that it is the rhythmic and passionate voice of some great spirit that has seen more than his fellowmen can see.

I have found more true politics in the poets of the English-speaking race than I have ever found in all the formal treatises on political science. There is more of the spirit of our own institutions in a few lines of Tennyson than in all the text-books on governments put together:

“A nation still, the rules and the ruled,
Some sense of duty, something of a faith,
Some reverence for the laws ourselves have made,
Some patient force to change them when we will,
Some civic manhood firm against the crowd.”

Can you find summed up the manly, self-helping spirit of Saxon liberty anywhere better than in those few lines? Men afraid of nobody, afraid of nothing but their own passions, on guard against being caught unaware by their own sudden impulses and so getting their grapple upon life in firm-set institutions, some reverence for the laws themselves have made, some patience, not passionate force, to change them when they will, some civic manhood firm against the

crowd. Literature, ladies and gentlemen, is revelation of the human spirit, and within the covers of this one book is a whole lot of literature, prose and poetry, history and rhapsody, the sober narration of the ecstasy of human excitement—things that ring in one's ears like songs never to be forgotten. And so I say, let us never forget that these deep sources, these wells of inspiration, must always be our sources of refreshment and of renewal. Then no man can put unjust power upon us. We shall live in that chartered liberty in which a man sees the things unseen, in which he knows that he is bound for a country in which there are no questions mooted any longer of right or wrong.

Can you imagine a man who did not believe these words, who did not believe in the future life, standing up and doing what has been the heart and centre of liberty always—standing up before the king himself and saying, "Sir, you have sinned and done wrong in the sight of God and I am his messenger of judgment to pronounce upon you the condemnation of Almighty God. You may silence me, you may send me to my reckoning with my Maker, but you can not silence or reverse the judgment." That is what a man feels whose faith is rooted in the Bible. And the man whose faith is rooted in the Bible knows that reform can not be stayed, that the finger of God that moves upon the face of the nations is against every man that plots the nation's downfall or the people's deceit; that these men are simply groping and staggering in their ignorance to a fearful day of judgment and that whether one generation witnesses it or not, the glad day of revelation and of freedom will come in which men will sing by the host of the coming of the Lord in His glory, and all of those will be forgotten, those little, scheming, contemptible creatures that forgot the image of God and tried to frame men according to the image of the Evil One.

You may remember that allegorical narrative in the Old Testament of those who searched through one cavern after another, cutting the holes in the walls and going into the secret places where all sorts of noisome things were worshipped. Men do not dare to let the sun shine in upon such things and upon such occupations and worships. And so I say there will be no halt to the great movement of the armies of reform until men forget their God, until they forget this charter of their liberty. Let no man suppose that progress can be divorced from religion, or that there is any other platform for the ministers of reform than the platform written in the utterances of our Lord and Savior.

America was born a Christian nation. America was born to exemplify that devotion to the elements of righteousness which are derived from the revelations of Holy Scripture.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have a very simple thing to ask of you. I ask of every man and woman in this audience that from this night on they will realize that part of the destiny of America lies in their daily perusal of this great book of revelations—that if they would see America free and pure they will make their own spirits free and pure by this baptism of the Holy Scripture.