

THE SACRED WRITINGS

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 21, 2001

~~IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.~~

I want to talk about the power of the Bible to make us good. I realize that the Bible can be used to justify terrorism, racism, slavery, subordination of women, oppression of workers, gay bashing, child abuse and many other bad things. But I want to emphasize the transforming power of the message of the Bible to make us good. The Apostle Paul says, "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful so that everyone who belongs to God may be equipped for every good work." The Bible, in other words, is meant to make us good.

One of the most dramatic illustrations of the power of the Bible to change people comes from South Africa. Bishop Tutu of South Africa visited Lincoln University several years ago and told this story. When missionaries came to South Africa they gathered Africans around them and said, "Let us pray." The Africans bowed their heads and closed their eyes. When they opened their eyes they discovered the missionaries had taken their land and given them the Bible. But the Africans learned to read the Bible. They read how God created *all* people in his image and came to rejoice that they were created in God's beautiful image. They read the genealogies - long lists of names of ancestors - and saw their own reverence for ancestors justified. They read of how God heard the cries of Israel in slavery, and believed God would hear their cries. They read how God raised up Moses to deliver God's people from slavery, and they trusted God would deliver them from apartheid.

The church told them to keep separate from white people. Their Bible told them Christ broke down walls that separate. The church told them slavery was God's will. Their Bible told them that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. The Europeans said God loved the White

European and cursed the Black African. Their Bible said God so loved the world that he gave his only son. In short, Bishop Tutu said, the message of Bible transformed and empowered the people of South Africa to stage a peaceful revolution that overturned apartheid.

If the message of the Bible can change a nation, it can also transform our lives—but not unless we know the message of the Bible. Unfortunately, most of us are biblically illiterate. A

Presbyterian Church in South Carolina tested their Sunday School students on Biblical knowledge.

This is what they discovered: Lot's wife was a pillar of salt by day and a ball of fire by night.

Samson slew the Philistines with the Ax of the Apostles. Moses went to the top of Mount Cyanide.

The Seventh Commandment is "Thou shalt not *admit* adultery." Like those students, many of us are

Biblically illiterate. Last week I encouraged you to start reading one of the Gospels. Kay reminded

me afterward that some of you might not know what a Gospel is. She's right. Survey after survey

shows that Presbyterians are the most *highly* educated and most biblically illiterate denomination.

What do Presbyterians believe about the Bible? We believe it's inspired by God. Some believe that the Bible is without error in the original manuscripts. But most of us believe that—even though the Bible is conditioned by cultures that embraced many customs we reject (such as polygamy) and sometimes tells contradictory stories (as in the reports of the death of King Saul)—that the Bible nevertheless instructs us for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

The Bible, Paul writes, is also useful for "reproof"—that means it shows us what God wants us to stop doing. The Bible is useful for "correction"—that means things God wants us to change.

The Bible shows us how to be good—that's what "instruction in righteousness" means. But the Bible will be useful only if we read, study, and inwardly digest it.

The story of what happened two hundred years ago on Pitcairn's Island testifies to the usefulness of the Bible. In 1789, half the crew of the English ship *The Bounty* mutinied. Captain Bligh and half his crew were set adrift in a small boat. In 1790, nine of the mutineers, attempting to

escape punishment, settled on Pitcairn's Island, an isolated, uninhabited South Seas island. They brought 19 Polynesians with them - 6 men, 12 women, and a young girl.

At first, the island was paradise. But within four years all 6 Tahitian men and all but four Englishmen had been *murdered*. Four Englishmen, ten women and some children *alone* survived.

One of the men learned how to make liquor and soon the men were drunk and sexually abusing the women. Fearing for their lives, the women and children fled to another part of the island and build a fort for protection. Despair and violence increased. One of the four Englishmen committed suicide. Another threatened the lives of everyone else and was axed to death by the two remaining Englishmen.

Alexander Smith, one of two, finally destroyed the still with all the liquor and went through months of alcohol withdrawal. Then Smith discovered the Bible from the remains of the Bounty,

but he couldn't read. Before dying of consumption, the remaining mutineer taught Smith to read using the Bible. Smith continued to read and slowly began to understand over a period of several

years. The book began to change Smith. He began teaching the children and women to read. He

taught them about Jesus. He instituted a daily prayer time, grace before meals, and Sunday

worship. A Church and a school were built. In 1808, 18 years after the mutineers arrived, Pitcairn's

Island was rediscovered by an American ship. The crew was shocked to find the thirty-five English-speaking inhabitants practicing the Christian faith. They discovered an island Paradise where men,

women and children lived in mutual respect, crime was non-existent and the inhabitants were generous with their meager resources. The Bible taught them how to love God and neighbor.

I'll close with one more story of how the Bible can change us. More than a hundred years

ago a young girl named Mary Jones lived in Wales. Even though she was just a little 6 year old girl

she loved going to church with her parents and listening to the Bible stories read. She wanted to

read those stories for herself in her own Bible. But she had problems - first, she couldn't read and

there was no school in her village. Second, she spoke Welsh and Welsh Bibles were very expensive. Her parents were poor weavers and had very little money. Mary despaired of learning to read her own Bible.

But she began to pray for God to make it possible. Years later, a school opened in a nearby town and Mary attended for the first time when she was 10. She learned to read quickly - but she still didn't have a Bible. She looked for ways to make money so she could buy a Welsh Bible. She kept a hen and sold its eggs. She sewed for people and made money. She baby sat. Six years later, at the age of 16, she had enough money. But there were no Welsh Bibles for sale in her little isolated village. She heard that a man named Thomas Charles living in a village twenty five miles away had some Welsh Bibles. So at the age of 16 she started walking early in the morning and arrived as evening was falling.

Charles was deeply impressed by Mary's faith and by her efforts to get a Bible. He decided that something had to be done to produce Bibles poor working class people could afford. So he went to London and told Mary's story to some friends. They were so impressed by her hunger for the Scriptures that they organized a society to print Bibles in Welsh and other languages. The Society was named the British and Foreign Bible Society and has gone on to publish affordable Bibles in Burmese, Mongolian, Afghani, Chinese and many other languages. Millions of people around the world own Bibles because a young girl named Mary Jones wanted so badly to read the Scriptures for herself that she wouldn't let any obstacle stop her.

Do you have a Bible? Do you know the message of the Bible? Timothy knew the message of the Bible from childhood because his mother and grandmother took time to tell him the old, old story. Are you instructing your children and grandchildren? Do you read the Bible? Why not start today?