

The Reckless Penknife

by T. De Witt Talmage

The Bible is the inspired word of God, and its message and authority are unmatched by any other book or source.

Scripture: Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 30:5, Isaiah 40:8, Jeremiah 36:23, Matthew 24:35, John 1:1, Romans 10:17, 2 Timothy 3:16, Hebrews 4:12, Revelation 22:18

Topics: "Biblical Authority", "Divine Wisdom"

Description

T. DeWitt Talmage preaches about the importance of honoring and respecting the Word of God, using the story of King Jehoiakim cutting up the scroll with his penknife as a cautionary tale. He emphasizes the impossibility of destroying the Word of God and the consequences of rejecting or altering it. Talmage challenges the audience to accept the Bible in its entirety, highlighting its divine wisdom and the futility of trying to undermine its authority. He warns against infidelity and the dangers of disregarding the Bible's teachings, urging listeners to embrace its truths and find solace and guidance in its promises.

Transcript

"When Jehudi had read three or four leaves, he cut it with his penknife."

-Jeremiah 36:23.

We look in upon a room in Jerusalem. Two men are there. At the table sits Baruch the scribe, with a roll of parchment and an iron pen in his hand. The other man is walking the floor, as if strangely agitated. There is an unearthly appearance about his countenance, and his whole frame quakes as if pressed upon by something unseen and supernal. It is Jeremiah, in the spirit of prophecy. Being too much excited to write with his own hand the words that the Almighty pours upon his mind about the destruction of Jerusalem, he dictates to Baruch the scribe. It is a seething, scalding, burning denunciation of Jehoiakim, the king, and a prophecy of coming disasters.

Of course, Jehoiakim the king hears of the occurrence, and he sends Jehudi to obtain the parchment and read its contents. It is winter. Jehoiakim is sitting in his comfortable winter house by a fire that glows upon the hearth, and lights up the faces of the lords, and princes, and senators who have gathered to hear the strange document. Silence is ordered. The royal circle bend forward to listen. Every eye is fixed. Jehudi unrolls the book gleaming with the words of God, and as he reads the king frowns; his eye kindles; his cheek burns; his foot comes down with thundering indignation. He snatches the book from Jehudi's hand,

feels for his knife, crumples up the book, and goes to work cutting it up with his penknife.

Thus God's book was permanently destroyed, and the king escaped. Was it destroyed? Did he escape? In a little while King Jehoiakim's dead body is hurled forth to blacken in the sun, and the only epitaph he ever had was that which Jeremiah wrote: "Buried with the burial of an ass;" while, to restore the book which was destroyed, Baruch again takes his seat at the table, and Jeremiah walks the floor and again dictates the terrible prophecy.

It would take more penknives than cutler ever sharpened to hew into permanent destruction the Word of God. He who shoots at this eternal rock will feel the bullet rebound into his own torn and lacerated bosom. When the Almighty goes forth armed with the thunderbolts of his power, I pity any Jehoiakim who attempts to fight him with a penknife.

That Oriental scene has vanished, but it has been often repeated. There are thousands of Jehoiakims yet alive who cut the Word of God with their penknives, and my object in this sermon is to designate a few of them.

The first man I shall mention as thus treating the Word of God is the one who receives a part of the Bible, but cuts out portions of it with his penknife and rejects them. Jehoiakim showed as much indignity toward the scroll when he cut one way as when he cut the other. You might as well behead Moses as to behead Jonah. Yes, sir, I shall take all of the Bible or none. Men laugh at us as if we were the most gullible people in the world for believing in the genuineness of the Scriptures; but there can be no doubt that the Bible, as we have it, is the same-no more, no less-as God wrote it. As to the books of the New Testament, the great writers of the different centuries give complete catalogues of their contents. Polycarp, Ignatius, Clemens Romanus, in the first century, give a catalogue of the New Testament books; Tertullian, Justin Martyr, in the second century; Cyprian and Origen in the third century; Augustine, Jerome, and Eusebius in the fourth century. Their catalogues of the different books of the New Testament silence the suggestion that any new books could have been stealthily put in. How many books are on this stand? You say threetwo Bibles and a hymnbook. There are twenty men here taking a list of these books. Would it be possible for any man to come on to this platform and lay a new book on this stand and you not know it? Neither was it possible for any body to put an additional book into this New Testament when all the Christian world was watching.

As to the books of the Old Testament, Christ sanctioned them by commending them to the Jews. If any part of the Old Testament had been uninspired, Christ would have said, "Search the Scriptures, all except that book of Jonah," or "Search the Scriptures, excepting the book of Esther." When Christ commends the canon of the Old Testament Scriptures to the people, he affirms its genuineness. There never could have been any interpolations in the Bible, for the Jews were constantly watching, and there were men whose lifetime business it was to attend to the keeping of the Scriptures unadulterated. Besides this, the Bible has always had enemies. If there had been any attempt at interpolation, Celsus in the second century, and Porphyry in the fourth century, would have proclaimed it. Yet they never even hinted at any thing like a want of genuineness, although they despised the book. Far easier would it be for a man in this day to insert a long paragraph in the Farewell Address of Washington, or an entire canto in Milton's Paradise Lost, than it would have been for any man at any time to insert a foreign, uninspired book in the Bible.

No, sir; I shall take all of the Bible or none. A man dies, having made a will. The people who expect a part of the inheritance assemble to hear the will read. The attorney reads it until he comes to a certain passage

of the will, when one of the heirs cries out, "I reject that passage." The attorney reads on, and some one else says, "I reject that passage, while I accept all of the rest of the will." The heirs go before the surrogate, and the judge decides: "You must take this will as a whole or not at all. You can not break a part of it, and leave the rest intact." Now I say in regard to this Will of my Father, in respect to this last Will and Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ, that if we break any part of the Will we break it all, and we lose our inheritance and go beggared through eternity.

By some shaft from hell, let the sun be cleft in twain, until, with shorn locks and dimmed eye, he stumbles his way through the heavens; but shear not this glorious old Bible of a single lock. The same infernal explosion that sent up into fragments a single book would shock the whole system of truth. Fire one house in a solid square, and into the whole block you hurl fiery destruction. Take one star from a whirling constellation, and the wheel of fire would crush on the highway of light; and remove one orb from this constellation of Bible-books that revolve in splendor about Jesus, the central Sun, and heaven itself would shriek at the catastrophe, amid the weeping of a God!

No, sir; you shall not rob me of a single word, of a single verse, of a single chapter of a single book of my Bible. When life, like an ocean, billows up with trouble, and death comes, and our bark is seasmitten, with halyards cracked and white sails flying in shreds, like a maniac's gray locks in the wind, then we will want God's Word to steer us off the rocks, and shine like lighthouses through the dark channels of death, and with hands of light beckon our stormtossed souls into the harbor. In that last hour take from me my pillow, take away all soothing draughts, take away the faces of family and kindred, take away every helping hand and every consoling voice; alone let me die on the mountain, on a bed of rock, covered only by a sheet of embroidered frost, under the slap of the nightwind, and breathing out my life on the bosom of the wild, wintry blast, rather than in that last hour take from me my Bible. Stand off, then, ye carping, clipping, meddling critics, with your penknives!

I can think of only one right way in which the Bible may be divided. A minister went into a house, and saw a Bible on the stand, and said, "What a pity that this Bible should be so torn! you do not seem to take much care of it. Half the leaves are gone." Said the man, "This was my mother's Bible, and my brother John wanted it, and I wanted it, and we could not agree about the matter, and so we each took a half. My half has been blessed to my soul, and his half has been blessed to his soul." That is the only way that I can think of in which the Word of God may be rightfully cut with a penknife.

The next man that I shall mention as following Jehoiakim's example is the infidel, who runs his knife through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and rejects everything. The hostility existing that night in that winterhouse among those lords and senators, exists yet. The enemies of this Book have gathered themselves into clubs, and have tried to marshal on their side chemist's laboratory, and astronomer's telescope, and geologist's pry, and mineralogist's hammer, and ornithologist's gun; and they have ransacked the earth and the heavens to see if they could not find arguments with which to refute the Bible, and balk the Church, and clip the wing of the Apocalyptic angel. With the black hulk of their pirate craft they have tried to run down this Gospel ship speeding on errands of salvation. They have tried to stab patriarch and prophet, evangelist and apostle, with Jehoiakim's penknife. They say that the Bible is a very weak book, filled with big stories and Munchausen adventures, and has no more authority than the Sliaster of the Hindoo, or the ZendAvesta of the Persian, or the Talmud of the Hebrew, or the Confucian writings of the Chinese, or the Sibylline books of the Romans, or the Koran of the Mohammedans.

Men strike their knife through this Book because they say that the light of nature is sufficient. Indeed! Have the fireworshippers of India, cutting themselves with lancets until the blood spurts at every pore, found the light of nature sufficient? Has the Bornesian cannibal, gnawing the roasted flesh from human bones, found the light of nature sufficient? Has the Chinese woman, with her foot cramped and deformed into a cow's hoof, found the light of nature sufficient? Could the ancients see heaven from the heights of Ida or Olympus? No! I call upon the pagodas of superstition, the Brahminic tortures, the infanticide of the Ganges, the bloody wheels of the Juggernaut, to prove that the light of nature is not sufficient. A star is beautiful, but it pours no light into the midnight of a sinful soul. The flower is sweet, but it exudes no balm for the heart's wound. All the odors that ever floated from royal conservatory, or princely hanginggardens, give not so much sweetness as is found in one waft from this Scripture mountain of myrrh and frankincense. All the waters that ever leaped in torrent, or foamed in cascade, or fell in summer shower, or hung in morning dew, gave no such coolness to the fevered soul as the smallest drop that ever flashed out from the showering fountains of this divine Book. If you like the light of nature better than that of revelation, why do you not go and root in the ground with the Hottentot; or go ride with the Laplander behind a team of dogs; or go help the Mexican pick cochineal; or go help the Arabs lasso the wild horse; or the Turk hunt for gallnuts and meerschaum. I bring China, and India, and Siberia, and Ethiopia, and Tartary, and New Holland, and Persia, and Hindostan, to prove, before all the hosts of hell, and the armies of heaven, and the nations of the earth, that the light of nature is not sufficient. "What must I do to be saved?" Sweltering nations have knelt at the feet of the Himalayan Mountains for ages asking that question, but the mountains made no response. Not one of the old peaks stooped down to lift a single soul on its shoulder into the heavens. Still the people cry, and still the mountains are silent- "what must I do to be saved?" Nations, in blindness and death, have knelt on the beach of the Persian Gulf, and Bengal Bay, and Caspian Sea, moaning out that question, but there was nothing in all the tumbling surf that responded. The winds mocked, and the waves spit their spray into the face of the dying nations. And so the cry went round the world, but the desert spoke not, and the Alps were silent, and the stars were dumb, and all the caverns, and hills, and seas but echoed back the dismal cry, "What must I do to be saved?" The light of nature is not sufficient.

Infidels strike their penknife through this Book because they say that it is cruel and indecent. There are things in Ezekiel and Solomon's Songs that they don't want read in their families. Ah! if the Bible is so pernicious, just show me somebody that has been spoiled by it. A thousand dollars reward if you will show rue a man who has been made cruel, or obscene, or reckless by the Bible. While you are trying in vain to pick out such a one, I will show you five hundred men in this audience who have by it been tamed out of rudeness, and lifted up out of sin, and enriched with innumerable virtues.

Again, they strike their penknife through this Bible because it is so full of unexplained mysteries. What! will you not believe any thing you can not explain? Have you fingernails? You say "Yes." Explain why, on the tip of your finger, there comes a nail. You can not tell me. You believe in the law of gravitation; explain it, if you can. I can ask you a hundred questions about your eyes, about your ears, about your face, about your feet, that you can not answer, and yet you find fault that I can not answer all the questions you may ask about this Bible. I would not give a farthing for the Bible if I could understand every thing in it. I would know that the heights and depths of God's truth were not very great if, with my poor, finite mind, I could reach every thing. A plain farmer said to a skeptic, "The mysteries of the Bible do not bother me. I read the Bible as I cat fish. In eating fish, when I come across a bone, I do not try to swallow it, but I lay it one side. When, in reading the prophecies, I come across that which is inexplicable, I say, 'There is a bone,' and I lay it one side. When I find something in a doctrine that staggers my reason, I say, 'That is a bone,' and I

lay it one side." Alas! my friends, that men should choke themselves to death with bones of mystery, when there is so much meat in this Bible on which the soul may get strong for eternity.

Again, the infidel strikes his penknife through this Book because, he says, if it were God's book, the whole world would have it. He says that it is not to be supposed that if God had any thing to say to the world, he would say it only to the small part of the human race who actually possess the Bible. To this I reply that the fact that only a part of the race receives any thing is no ground for believing that God did not bestow it. Who made oranges and bananas? You say, God. I ask, How can that be, when thousands of our race never saw an orange or a banana? If God were going to give such things, why did he not give them to all? The argument that the giving of the Bible to a part of the race would imply a wicked partiality on the part of God, and consequently that he did not give it at all, would prove that he did not give oranges and bananas to the people of the tropics, for that would be partiality. The fact is that God has a right to do as he pleases, and he is constantly partial in a thousand things. He gives us a pleasant climate, while he gives earthquakes and tornadoes to Mexico. He gives incomputable harvests of wheat to Sicily, but scant berries and polar bears, and the ungainly walrus, to the Arctic inhabitants. He gives one man two good eyes, and to another none. He gives you two feet; to another man no feet at all. To you he gives perpetual health; to another man coughing consumption, or piercing pleurisy, or stinging gout, or fiery erysipelas. He does not treat us all alike. If all the human race had the same climate, the same harvests, the same health, the same advantages, then you might, by analogy, argue that if he gave a Bible at all, he would give it to the whole race at the same time. If you say to me that the fact that the Bible is now in the possession of only a small part of the human family is proof that he did not send the Bible, then I say that the fact that only a part of the world has peaches and apples proves that God never made peaches and apples; and the fact that a part of the world has a mild, sunshiny climate, proves conclusively that God does not make the climate. Indeed, I will carry on your argument until I can prove that God made nothing at all; for there is not one single physical or intellectual blessing that we possess that has not been denied some one else. No! no! Because God, in his sovereign mercy, has given us a book that some others do not possess, let us not be so ungrateful as to reject it—blowing out our own lantern because other people have not a light; rending off the splinters from our broken bone because other people have not been able to get a bandage; dashing our own ship on a rock because other vessels have not a compass; cutting up our own Bible with a penknife because other people have not a revelation.

Again, the infidel strikes his penknife through this Book by saying, "You have no right to make the Bible so prominent, because there are other books that have in them great beauty and value." There are grand things in books professing no more than human intelligence. The heathen Bible of the Persians says, "The heavens are a point from the pen of God's perfection." "The world is a bud from the bower of his beauty." "The sun is a spark from the light of his wisdom." "The sky is a bubble on the sea of his power." Beautiful! Beautiful! Confucius taught kindness to enemies; the Shaster has great affluence of imagery; the Veda of the Brahmins has ennobling sentiment; but what have you proved by all this? Simply that the Author of the Bible was as wise as all the great men that have ever lived put together; because, after you have gone through all lands, and all ages, and all literatures, and after you have heaped every thing excellent together and boiled it down, you have found in all that realm of all the ages but a portion of the wisdom that you find in this one book.

The fact is that all the jar of hell's batteringrams against this buttress of truth only proves the strength of the wall. All of the fleets of perdition have come sailing against this craft, managed by a few fishermen; but it has proved an ironclad able to sink with a few strokes the armaments of infidelity. One little Kearsarge

thundering to darkness and hell a thousand flaunting Alabamas.

Let Voltaire come on with his acute philosophy; and Hume with his scholarship; and Chesterfield with his polished insinuations; and Gibbon with his onesided historical statements; and Shaftesbury with his sarcasm; and Hobbes with his subtlety; and Blount and Bolingbroke with their armed hostility-yea, come on, Platonic philosophers, and German infidels, and Boston transcendentalists, and all ye helmeted sons of darkness-I charge upon you with a regiment of mountain shepherds and Galilee fishermen. Forward, ye inspired men, to the strife! Steady! Take aim! Fire! Their ranks waver! They break! They fly! Victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ!

I want no better proof of the divinity of this Book than the fact that it has withstood this mighty and continuous attack, and come down to us without a chapter effaced, or a parable riddled, or a miracle injured, or a promise scarred. No other book could have lived an hour in such a sea; no other force could have stood under such crossfire. This Book today is foremost. In philosophy, it is honored above the works of Descartes, Bacon, Aristotle, and Socrates. In history, it wins more respect than Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon. In poetry, it far outshines the Iliad and Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Inferno, and Paradise Lost. It has been published in more than two hundred languages. The earth quakes with the quick revolution of its printingpress. The best art has come to the illustration of its pages, to the adornment of its lids, to the setting of its type. Its scenes of glory and promise blossom on every wall, and thrill through the music of the oratorio and orchestra.

If infidelity is as successful in the next fifty years, in its war against the Bible, as it has been in the past fifty, the year 1950 will see the Bible in the possession of every man on the earth who has a hand to hold it. One wave of this Book above the throne of tyranny, and they shall fall; above the temples of superstition, and they shall crumble; above the wilderness, and it shall bloom like the garden of the Lord. Thou Prince of Books, we hail thee to thy coronation! the wheeling earth thy chariot! the bending sky thy triumphal arch! the great heavens one starstudded, cloud-striped banner!

Make the application of this subject yourselves. I have preached it that I might show you that we who believe in the Bible are not so verdant as people suppose, since we have a great many stout reasons for believing in it. I have tried, by my remarks, to raise the Book higher in your estimation. Take it into your heart! Take it into your house! Take it into your shop! Take it into your store! Though you may seem to get along quite well without this Book in your days of prosperity, there will come a time to us all when our only consolation will be this blessed Gospel.

A blind girl had been in the habit of reading her Bible by means of raised letters such as are prepared for the use of the blind; but after a while, by working in a factory, the tips of her fingers became so calloused that she could no more by her hands read the precious promises. She cut off the tips of her fingers that her touch might be more sensitive; but still she failed with her hands to read the raised letters. In her sorrow, she took the Bible and said, "Farewell, my dear Bible. You have been the joy of my heart!" Then she pressed the open page to her lips, and kissed it, and as she did so she felt with her mouth the letters, "The Gospel according to St. Mark." "Thank God!" she said; "if I can not read the Bible with my fingers, I can read it with my lips!"

Oh! in that last hour when the world goes away from our grasp, press this precious Gospel to our lips, that, in that dying kiss, we may taste the sweetness of that promise, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee."

"How precious is the Book divine,
By inspiration given!
Bright as a lamp its doctrines shine
To guide our souls to heaven.
"This lamp through all the tedious night
Of life shall guide our way,
Till we behold the clearer light
Of an eternal day."

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