

First Bible Lessons.

BY ESSEX CHOLMONDELEY.

SOME houses contain a library, a room whose walls are lined with the inviting backs of books, where tranquillity invites to a leisurely companionship with friends old and new. There is another kind of Library which every household possesses or may possess. Its walls are familiar to old and young alike, through its doorway thousands of men and women have come in and gone out to find pasture all their lives. This library is the Bible. In it are found books of history, of poetry and romance, of travel, of biography, a very varied Literature. There is however one theme which unifies the collection, it is that of God's relationship with mankind. On the human side, this relationship is shown in varying degrees of perfection and imperfection. There is One Example of perfection in this Bible Library, otherwise the men, women and nations which we meet with there are often ignorant, never perfect. Every one of them is regarded in their relationship with God and it is for this reason that the Library has a permanent interest and value for mankind. It contains the Words of Life, life with God.

There was a time when the Bible was almost the only book which every British family possessed. It formed the chief mental diet of persons of all ages and it was a plentiful supply. That time has passed. An ever increasing flood of literature invades our leisure and our space. Our Bibles now occupy an inch or two of our bookshelves and perhaps ten minutes of our daily lives. This happens to many of us under protest and we determine that in the chil-
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dren's lives an adequate daily space shall be made which the Bible shall fill. Many parents are deeply concerned with the question when and how to introduce children to this collection of books. They are prepared to enter the Library with their young children in order to share with them the good things stored up within its walls.

When is the first entry to be made?

Bible stories, simply told, colour our very early years. Everyone will be able to remember for himself infantine reflections upon Abraham, the Flood or the Shepherds. "Mother, is that David?" asked a child of three or four, on hearing a violin beautifully played for the first time. Bible stories, however, are not the Bible and it is the Bible with which it is desirable that persons should be intimate. It is thought by some people that the Old Testament is too complicated a collection of books to introduce to children before an age when it can be studied historically. Others say that the New Testament loses in freshness and vitality if studied throughout school life.

It has been proved by many a P.N.E.U. parent and others, that with care, both old and New Testament can be read with delight and thoughtful reverence by persons of six years old and even less and that this attitude can be held throughout a lifetime. The Old Testament is a very good friend to children, they understand its vision. People are people, they are not merely creatures holding high positions or leading great armies or wearing splendid clothes at gorgeous pageants. There is goodness, badness, ignorance, clearly recognizable and under the eye of a loving and just God. Wonderful things happen, strength of arm and human power are always overcome by spiritual strength and Power Divine. The Old Testament is a refuge for the moral and supernatural sense of children. It need hardly be said that the New Testament is the

best friend that children of all ages can ever find in a Library.

These two friendships must be formed together. The Old Testament cannot be taught independently of the New for the whole is a continuous revelation of God's love. The Old Testament, well read, will show children a loving God teaching and helping a wild, ignorant people, correcting them with enemies and persecutions, sending them noble
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men and women to guide and rule them and to set them free. Justice and forgiveness are two very high manifestations of a Father's love, they are found when the Old Testament stories are read in some definite sequence. The book of Judges (that strange blending of man's ferocity with God's mercy) caused the remark from a child of eight: "God is patient! I should have given the children of Israel up as a bad job"! She saw clearly that certain behaviour led to definite though unexpected results and that because God is a loving God, He directs those results and helps His people to bear them. She would not have understood this if, at the same time as she was reading the Old Testament, she had not also been reading about Christ's life and teaching, nor would the truth have been so clear to her if for two years she had not been slowly becoming familiar with God's dealings with mankind as revealed in both Testaments. "Christ would not have allowed that" was the comment on Jael and Sisera—"That's most lovely" after reading about Blind Bartimaeus—"I always love that piece" after the Miracle of the loaves and fishes. This is one instance of a growing friendship. Education is, as we know, the Science of Relationships, or the knowledge of friendships; to be friends with the Bible is to be on the highroad which leads to the Supreme Friendship of our Immortal lives.

How are Bible Lessons to be conducted?

Lessons, like meals, must be regular. Intercourse with the Bible (Old and New Testaments on alternate days) must be held daily and at a stated time. This may be a difficulty but the hardship of keeping *one* time is as nothing compared with the hardship of finding *any* time. If both the parent and the child know when they are going to read together, they come with a prepared mind. By making the reading a part of the routine of daily life, it is hoped that both Bible reading and thinking will become a life-long habit, one that can be acquired in no other way. A habit of Bible thinking means a New Testament point of view, bringing experiences to the test of Christ's teaching.

There must be some settled course of study. Those people who have not the leisure to think out their own course will find Dr. Paterson Smyth's "Bible for the Young" series a very reliable help both in choosing [sic] and in thinking
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over the chapters to be read. "Thinking over" is a simple way of preparing the lesson, one which requires no special training or experience as a teacher and which happily takes up very little time to perform. It is well to read through the chapter to a good stopping place, one which will coincide with the fourth minute in the next day's reading. Without looking at the Bible text, see how much it is possible to narrate of it, bringing personal experience to bear on its teaching. Think of the less usual words which occur in the passage and see that the meaning is clear. Then repeat the process with another passage of similar length. When two people of different ages together read a chapter which has been "thought on" thus by the elder of the two, a very happy ten minutes results and if the elder one has the leisure to read some simple commentary as well as the Bible text, he or she will never regret the time so spent.

The child is going to do at the Bible lesson exactly what the parent or teacher has done in his preparation, with these differences: the Bible text is read aloud, sometimes by the parent, sometimes by the child. The child will then tell what she can and afterwards any difficulties will be made clear if necessary. These regular daily readings from the Bible itself will begin at six years old or a year earlier and the Bible language will be boldly adopted and honestly adhered to from the first. It is beautiful, arresting language and therefore easy to narrate and pleasurable to read.

These first Bible lessons are to be kept as simple as possible. This is Miss Mason's advice in "Parents and Children," Chapter XI.

"Read your Bible story to the child, bit by bit; get him to tell you in his own words (keeping as close as he can to the Bible words) what you have read and then if you like, talk about it but not much."

Never let information become a continual drenching downpour, blotting out the sunshine and producing flood rather than growth. Let it rather be a light April shower coming quickly and passing on leaving the country fresher and more bright from its departure. It is the Bible that children need, if they wish to know about the Bible they always ask for information. They usually ask people who
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they see are interested in the things with which the Bible is concerned.

A thorough knowledge of the Bible is a valuable possession in these times of confusion and adventure. To help each other to knowledge and to share it is a joy which we should not suffer to elude us. If we sow this service we reap a very great joy.