



The Bible as a source of comfort

Angus Toplady, an eighteenth century Anglican priest, is supposed to have written the hymn Rock of Ages on a playing card whilst sheltering from a storm in the Mendip Hills in 1776. It speaks of a refuge and hiding place – ‘let me hide myself in thee’ which reflects exactly the idea in Psalm 46. And in 1872, when a ship was sinking in the Bay of Biscay, a man who was saved was asked what the passengers were doing when the ship went down. He said that the last he heard was “Rock of Ages,” sung in unison by the doomed passengers.

- 1 *God is our refuge and strength,
an ever-present help in trouble.*
- 2 *Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,*
- 3 *though its waters roar and foam
and the mountains quake with their surging.*

(Psalm 46:1-3, NIV).

Jesus’ words in Matthew also speak of comfort in times of stress and anxiety. Much of the stress of modern living is induced by two features: our busyness and the proliferation of choices. But also in a world where the Christian faith seems marginalised, we may also be anxious about jobs, our own identity and the prospect of death. Can we find fulfilment if we are constantly worrying about life?

- 25 *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink;
or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the
body more than clothes?*

(Matthew 6:25, NIV).



Conclusion

The Bible, like all sacred texts, reads differently from the perspective of faith. Here personal application becomes a pressing need and part of the life of devotion to God. But interpretation itself is not without its problems. The Old Testament scholar Brevard Childs reminds us of the need to respect both the historical context and the challenge for the modern reader who seeks to find ways that the ancient texts addresses his or her own culture.

As an example of how one Christian believer uses Scripture, the Methodist founder John Wesley, describes how in his evangelical tradition he aims to be ‘the man of one book’.

“I want to know one thing, the way to heaven—how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! ...Let me be homo unius libri [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his Book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.”

(*Sermons, John Wesley*)

But Wesley also recognised the lack of clarity that sometimes attends a reading of the text:

“Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? ...I then search after and consider parallel passages of Scripture, “comparing spiritual things with spiritual.” I meditate thereon, with all the attention and earnestness of which my mind is capable.”

(*John Wesley, Sermons*)

We might conclude that to read the Bible uncritically is to be in danger of pouring our own meaning into it, of forcing it to produce guidance and structures it does not in reality contain. It is to make it reflect our culture rather than to transform it.