

VERILY, THE KJV ENDURETH!¹
Psalm 119: 11
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.

It was one of the first verses of scripture I ever learned, and it served as the basis for all the scripture that I memorized as a child, all of it from the King James Version. We did not think of it as any kind of “version”—it was just “the Bible.” What else could the Bible be other than the KJV?

I

It had all those “thee’s and thou’s” that just made it sound more holy. And it had “lo,” as in the Christmas story, when the shepherds were *abiding in the field....and lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid*. Ever since then, I have wanted the shepherds to be *sore afraid*, not just “frightened” or even “terrified.” And I want baby Jesus to be *wrapped in swaddling clothes*, not *wrapped in bands of cloth*. For many of us, the vocabulary and cadences of the KJV were part of the air we breathed. And that old language still resonates somewhere deep down inside in a way that modern language cannot and never will.

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And of course there are all those *begats*. Many a person has started to read the Bible from page one in Genesis and do fine until they get to chapter 10 and encounter all those *begats*. And in the New Testament there is the story of the raising of Lazarus, the story that has the shortest verse in the Bible: *Jesus wept*. Thank God for that verse! It has saved many a young child who was asked to recite a favorite verse of scripture!

And then there is the sexist language. *Glory to God in the highest, sing the angels to the shepherds, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*² I always pull out the KJV for Christmas Eve services, but invariably I choke on that verse. Of course, we all know intellectually what it meant, but our language has changed significantly over 400 years, and gender inclusiveness is only one way it has changed.

Many people assume that the KJV itself has not changed, that the words were set in stone from 1611 on. But the committee of over 50 scholars chosen by King James to work on the translation argued, wrangled, debated, and quibbled over every verse. They were masters of nitpicking! The KJV has been called the only masterpiece of the English language produced by a committee. It took seven years of this quibbling before they completed the work in 1611, and even then there were problems.

² Luke 2: 14.

When the final product was sent to the royal printer, the typeset was done in haste and teemed with typos. In the 1612 edition there is a verse from Psalm 119 that was supposed to read, *Princes have persecuted me without a cause....*³ But the poor typesetter made it, *Printers have persecuted me without a cause!* My guess is that he either did it out of spite for a printer he didn't like, or that he did it unconsciously in what today we would call a "Freudian slip." The most notorious error occurred in the 1631 edition. The negative was left out of the fourth commandment in Exodus 20, so that it read, *Thou shalt commit adultery!* If you find one of those Bibles in your attic, hold on to it! It is really valuable!

One of the early editions had a mistake in it that gave it the nickname, "The Judas Bible." In that edition, Matthew's gospel has Judas, not Jesus, saying to his disciples to remain while he goes to pray. Here is the way Matthew 26: 26 reads in that mistaken edition: *Then cometh Judas with them to a place called Gethsemane, and saith unto the disciples, Sit ye here, while I go and pray yonder.*

So we should never be surprised at revisions and new translations. There are always those who think that an old translation is somehow more reliable and more holy. We still hear such nonsense as "If the King James was

³ Psalm 119: 161.

good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for me.” But language changes. Older and more reliable ancient manuscripts are discovered. For example, the pew Bible we use, The New Revised Standard Version,” is also the work of an ecumenical committee, and it takes into consideration the discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as other discoveries that were written much closer to the biblical events than those used in 1611.

There is always a suspicion when a new translation appears. When the Revised Standard Version was first published in the 1950’s, at a time when Senator McCarthy was accusing nearly everyone of being a Communist, the Bible came out with a red cover! To this day there are people who accuse the Revised Standard Version of being Communist inspired, when in reality it is one of the finest translations ever produced.

Some people may be surprised to know that there are no original manuscripts of any book in the Bible. The only manuscripts we have are copies, and some of the manuscripts used by today’s translators are five or even six centuries older than the manuscripts used by the KJV translators.

II

This brings me to the title of this sermon: “Verily, the KJV Endureth.” The word “verily” is the word the KJV translators used when Jesus was about to say something that was especially important. Modern translators change

“verily, verily” to something like “truly, truly” or even “most certainly.” The KJV translators used “verily” to mean, “Pay attention! What I am about to say is deep truth!”

Why do we read this ancient book? Every Sunday a portion of scripture is read. Every Sunday people of every church in every denomination study some portion of it. Admittedly, there are reasons for not reading and studying it. There are parts of it that are exceedingly dull, like the six long chapters in Exodus (25-30) that describe the tabernacle all the way from the dimensions and color of the curtains to the recipe of the anointing oil. There are the long lists of kings and dietary laws and tribes and tribal territories that would make even Moses yawn.

There are the barbarities in which God is said to instruct Israel to kill every last man, woman, and child in a city, showing no mercy. There is the ancient cosmology that assumes the world is flat and has four corners. There is the belief that rain comes from God opening the windows of the firmament and allowing the water to flow through those windows onto the earth.⁴ There are the mythological creatures mentioned in the Bible, like the satyrs (half man/half goat) found dancing in Isaiah 13.⁵

⁴ See Genesis 6: 11.

⁵ Isaiah 13: 21.

No wonder some people scratch their heads in wonder that we in the church still read and study this ancient book written by different people over a period of 3,000 years. One writer calls the Bible “a swarming compost of a book, an Irish stew of poetry and propaganda, law and legalism, myth and murk, history and hysteria.”⁶

The KJV even mentions the ancient Greek and Roman mythological creature called a cockatrice, which in early folklore meant a rooster-serpent that could kill others in a flash. No one lived to tell about a cockatrice because it was believed that even to glimpse one was to die instantly. This mythological creature actually plays a part in the image of the peaceable kingdom found in Isaiah. The KJV reads: *And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.*⁷ Modern translations, recognizing the folklore of the cockatrice, have changed it to “adder” or “viper.” But the image of Isaiah is that this small child, of all people, could place a hand on the hole of a creature more dangerous and more uncertain than anything we can imagine! That is the kind of peace God envisions!

⁶ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking, a Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 8.

⁷ Isaiah 11: 8-9 (KJV).

We study the Bible because it is a book about us, a book about life as it really is. It tells of people like us who struggle with God and with our questions about God. It is full of people like us who at one and the same time can be believing and unbelieving. It tells of people who have the greatest of intentions but still fail. It is full of the innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, heroes and villains. And through the stories of their lives, we see our stories.

But it is much more than that. Otherwise, we could just as easily study *Moby Dick* or *The Brothers Karamazov* or many other books that depict life as it is. The Bible is much more: it is the seminal story of our faith. It is not just a book about people; it is a book about God, and the way people have thought of God and imagined God over many centuries. Ultimately, it is a book about the one person who was perceived to embody God more than any other. The Apostle Paul would later say, *God was in Christ...*⁸ And through the spirit of this Christ, God still speaks.

More liturgical churches, after reading scripture, say the phrase, "This is the Word of God." I much prefer to say, "Listen for the Word of God." Some can hear these ancient words, and all they hear are ancient words. But if we

⁸ II Corinthians 5: 19.

listen, deeply listen, God still speaks through these words, even in the Jacobean English of the KJV.

Even if we no longer spend a lot of time reading the majestic verses of the KJV, we can celebrate their publication 400 years ago. Those words still live in our hearts and speak to our needs. When we don't know which way to turn, the words of Psalm 23 still speak: *The Lord is my shepherd....* When we do work out of love for the work itself, we draw from Paul's description of *a labor of love*.⁹ When we realize how little we understand, we say that *we see through a glass, darkly*.¹⁰ When a dishonest politician is forced to resign we echo the words of II Samuel: *How are the mighty fallen*.¹¹ When we escape danger by a close call, we use the words of Job: I escaped *by the skin of my teeth*.¹² When we stand at the grave of a loved one, we still take heart at the words of the psalmist: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thy rod and thy staff they comfort me*.¹³

III

So we continue to read and study the Bible. It is not just for specialists, but we gain insight from those specialists who have devoted their lives to

⁹ I Thessalonians 1: 3.

¹⁰ I Corinthians 13: 12.

¹¹ II Samuel 1: 27.

¹² Job 19: 20.

¹³ Psalm 23: 4.

translation and understanding of this book. Thank God for that long line of devoted people who have done the work of translation and interpretation.

Now it is left to us to become literate Christians. Reading the Bible is like looking at a window. If you only look *at* the window, you see streaks and dust; you see the crack where someone's frisby hit it; you see the place where someone whacked a fly that had landed on it. But if you look *through* the window, you can see the world beyond.

Four hundred years have passed since this landmark publication first appeared. Many things have changed since then. Yet, if you give it a chance, even in its old English, it can still work wonders in your life. When that original committee of fifty scholars completed their work, they wrote a dedication to King James. They spoke to the King about the Spirit of God, who, in their words, "Removeth the scales from our eyes, the veil from our hearts, opening our wits that we may understand his word, enlarging our hearts, yea, correcting our affections that we may love it above gold and silver, yea, that we may love it the end."¹⁴ May it be so for us. Amen.

¹⁴ Quoted in Jon M. Sweeny, *Verily, Verily, the KJV—400 Years of Influence and Beauty* (Zondervan Press, 2011), p. 198.