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BUNYAN AND THE UNKNOWN VERSE

By Gary Townsend

Look at the generations of old, and see, did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded?

I wonder if you know where the above verse comes from? If you have no idea please don't feel too ashamed of your ignorance! The origins of this verse perplexed one Mr John Bunyan for over a year. John had read this somewhere and it came to his mind at a time when he was worried about whether or not he was of the number of the elect. He found that these words spoke powerfully to him and his spirits were lifted. Naturally, John wanted to know book, chapter and verse in the Bible and he searched and searched but could not find it anywhere. Let me quote Mr Bunyan himself:

*'...for several days I was greatly perplexed, and as often ready to sink with faintness in my mind; but one day, after I had been many weeks oppressed and cast down therewith, as I was giving up the ghost of all my hopes of ever attaining life, that sentence fell with weight upon my spirit: 'Look at the generations of old, and see, did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded'? At which I was greatly encouraged in my soul ...So, coming home, I presently went to my Bible to see if I could find that saying, not doubting but to find it presently, for it was with such strength and comfort on my spirit that I was as if it talked with me. Well, I looked, but I found it not ... then I did ask first this good man, and then another, if they knew where it was, but they knew no such place...Thus I continued above a year, and could not find the place.'*¹

So where does this verse which, as John said, *...should so suddenly, and with such comfort and strength, seize and abide upon my heart*² ... come from? John...*doubted not but that it was in the Holy Scripture*³. Well, to John's amazement, and doubtless to ours, the words are from the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus:

*...but at last, casting my eye upon the Apocrypha books, I found it in Ecclesiasticus, chap. ii.10. This at the first did somewhat daunt me, because it was not in those texts which we call holy and canonical...*⁴

But John could not doubt the good done to him by these words:

*And I bless God for that word, for it was of good to me. That word doth still oftentimes shine before my face.*⁵

As loyal Anglicans I believe that we ought to read the books called Apocrypha for, *the Church doth read (them) for example of life and instruction of manners...*⁶ The line our Reformers took over the place of the books of the Apocrypha is something we ought to be proud of for, in the first place, they did not recognise them as having such authority as, *those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.*⁷ And so these writings are not to be used, to establish any doctrine.⁸ It is also wonderful to see how consistent Cranmer was in using quotations from the Apocrypha in the light of the reformed understanding of them. The bits he uses are clearly examples of life and manners. I refer to the two quotes from Tobit in the offertory section of the Communion service (Tobit 4:7-9).⁹

But I am also proud that our Reformers took the line of not casting off the books of the Apocrypha altogether. It may be that Mr Bunyan was a beneficiary of that decision and it may be that, some day, you and I might find us saying along with him: *I bless God for that word, for it was of good to*

me. That word doth still oftentimes shine before my face.

You can read more about the Apocrypha in the Autumn 2006 edition of Cross†Way (No. 102).

Gary Townsend is Assistant Curate in Tonbridge and a member of Church Society Council.

Endnotes:

- 1) Bunyan, J. *Grace Abounding To The Chief Of Sinners*. Sections 62-65 in the 1905 Thomas Nelson edition.
- 2) *Ibid.* Section 64.
- 3) *Ibid.*
- 4) *Ibid.* Section 65.
- 5) *Ibid.*
- 6) Art. VI of the XXXIX Articles Of Religion.
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) *Ibid.*
- 9) It's true that reference is made to Tobias & Sara in one of the prayers of blessing in the marriage service in the 1548 edition of the Prayer Book but this was dropped in the revision of 1552.