

A Little Bird Told Me

***Everyday Expressions
from Scripture***

Timothy Cross

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Introduction

There is no book to compare with the sixty-six books which comprise the Bible. The Bible is in a category all of its own. Why is the Bible the God of all books? It is so because it is the Book of God. 'All Scripture is God-breathed ...' (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV). The incomparability of the Bible stems from its being no less than the written Word of the living God Himself. The absolute authority of the Bible for all matters concerning belief and practice cannot be separated from the absolute authority of the supreme, sovereign God Himself, who, by His Holy Spirit, caused the Bible to be written.

The Bible is a vast book, yet the message of the Bible is simple. The message of Scripture is the message of salvation. It is centred on God's own Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, and His atoning death on the cross to save sinners. The inspired Word points us to the incarnate Word. If the message of the Bible's 31,173 verses were to be encapsulated in just one verse, the verse would be John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

It is a sad fact that the message of the Bible today – especially here in my own land of the United Kingdom – is largely unknown. Christians are in the minority, and biblical illiteracy and ignorance, even among the educated, seems to be at an all-time high. Yet this being said, unbeknown to both speaker and hearer, expressions from the Bible are frequently quoted! Historically, the influence of the Bible has been so great that it has permeated the very fibre of the English language. People quote biblical expressions without knowing that they are doing so.

The following pages focus on some of the expressions from the Bible that have entered into our everyday life and conversa-

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tion. The sayings' origins are revealed, and something of their meaning and application is explained. The author's prayer is that this will be of interest to both Christians and non-Christians alike. The author's prayer and hope is also that it will cause some to think carefully about the main message of the Bible and ponder the divine purpose behind its writing – 'written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name' (John 20:31).

History reveals that revivals of Christianity have always gone hand-in-hand with a revival of interest in the Bible. True Christians have an appetite for God's Word. Surely, though, it is also true to say that a revival of interest in the Bible would also spark a revival of Christianity, for the Word of God is living and life-giving, and has power to transform lives and destinies. If the pages that follow catalyse an interest in the Bible, and cause a desire to know the One beyond and behind the sacred pages, the author's labour of love will have been abundantly rewarded.

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1

The apple of my eye

The expression 'You are the apple of my eye' has entered into popular poetry and song. The term is used to describe someone who is very dear, precious and special to us. Think, for instance, of a couple on their wedding day, making their marriage vows. There are millions of women in the world, but out of them all, this one woman is uniquely special to this one man. He has chosen just her to be his special, lifelong companion, and has pledged his marital faithfulness to her alone. She is 'the apple of his eye'.

The expression 'The apple of my eye' has a very ancient pedigree. It goes back to the time of Moses some 1,600 years B.C. Amazingly, it refers not to the love and affection which occurs between human beings, but to the love and tender care which Almighty God has burning in His heart for His people. In Deuteronomy 32:9, 10, Moses wrote: 'For the LORD's portion is His people; Jacob is the place of His inheritance. He found him in a desert land and in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; he encircled him, He instructed him, *He kept him as the apple of His eye*' (emphasis mine). Then, many centuries later, after the exile of God's people to Babylon and their subsequent return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple, in spite of their sin bringing upon them God's righteous chastisement, the covenant love of God for His people was still the same. They were His special people, for we read in Zechariah 2:8 'For thus says the LORD of hosts: "He sent me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for *he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.*"'(emphasis mine).

In Old Testament times, therefore, out of all the peoples and nations of the world, God had His special people – a people

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whom he had chosen and redeemed for Himself. They were 'the apple of His eye'. This special relationship to Him was not because of any merit in themselves, but solely because of the electing love and sovereign grace of God. God Himself reminded them: 'For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the LORD loves you ...' (Deut. 7:6-8).

The love of God for His people is the greatest and most unfathomable mystery of all. That a holy God, all-sufficient in and of Himself, should love sinners and enter into a special relationship with them is beyond belief – but the Bible tells us it is so.

A literal translation of the original Hebrew expression 'the apple of my eye' would read 'the little man of my eye'. It is a reference to the pupil – the delicate and sensitive part of the eye essential for sight and protected by the eyelid. The expression can only be figurative as, while the God of the Bible is all-seeing, He has no physical eyes as, essentially, 'God is Spirit' (John 4:24), that is, without a body. The term, though, while figurative, speaks volumes about the reality of the divine sensitivity of God towards the people whom He loves. The eye is one of the most sensitive parts of the body. A tiny grain of sand in it produces an irritation out of all proportion to the size of the grain. But in the age to come, the Bible reveals, 'God will wipe away every tear from their [that is, His redeemed people's] eyes' (Rev. 7:17).

'He who touches you touches the apple of His eye' (Zech. 2:8). We are dealing here with a term of endearment – with the love

The apple of my eye

of God for His children. The Christian's salvation is due solely to the love of God. The initiative in salvation is always with God and not with us. His love for us always precedes our love for Him. Our love for Him is always a response to His love for us. 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins ... We love Him because He first loved us. (1 John 4:10, 19). The Bible reveals that salvation is actually a result of the triune love of the triune God. If we rejoice in God's salvation, it is because, in love, God the Father chose us to be saved before the foundation of the world and in His love sent His Son to die to procure our salvation – 'Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us' (Eph. 5:2). Then, in God's providential timing, He sent His Holy Spirit upon us to apply the work of Christ's salvation to our hearts, bestowing on us saving faith in the crucified Saviour. 'The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us' (Rom. 5:5).

Christians, therefore, are most certainly 'the apple of God's eye', because they are the recipients and beneficiaries of the triune love of the triune God – 'elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1:2).

Amidst the turmoil of his life, David prayed to God, 'Keep me as the apple of Your eye; hide me under the shadow of Your wings' (Ps. 17:8). This is a good prayer for us to make when we are aware of our weakness and vulnerability in this difficult and dangerous world. If we belong to Jesus, we may be assured and reassured that we are not mere pawns at the mercy of 'the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'.¹ We are loved by God. We are

1. Shakespeare, Hamlet 3:1

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safe under His providential care. He regards us as 'the apple of His eye' (Zech. 2:8). He Himself says 'Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love ...' (Jer. 31:3). On the authority of the Bible one may say: 'He cares for you' (1 Pet. 5:7).

*Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit breathing from above
Thou hast taught me it is so.
O this full and perfect peace!
O this transport all divine!
In a love that cannot cease,
I am His and He is mine!*

(GEORGE WADE ROBINSON, 1838–77)

2

No room at the Inn

It was lunchtime when I was in college. A friend suggested that we go into town for a quick burger. Arriving at the fast-food outlet, the queue extended from the counter to the door. Had we joined it, we would have been late for our afternoon lecture. ‘No room at the inn’ – said my friend. ‘We’ll try somewhere else.’

Most would know that the expression ‘No room at the inn’ is connected with the Christmas story – with the Nativity of Christ – for Christmas is still widely celebrated in the West, even if it is celebrated in a non-Christian way, to use an oxymoron. The expression originates from Luke’s account of the birth of Christ. Luke 2:7 reads ‘And [Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because *there was no room for them in the inn*’ (emphasis mine).

Luke 2:7 is the only verse in the Bible indicating that the Lord Jesus was born in an animal shelter which contained feeding troughs. Early tradition says He was born in a cave – a cave used for sheltering animals. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built on the supposed site of Christ’s birth, contains a cave or grotto which marks the site of this momentous event.

Why was the Lord of glory born in an animal shelter? The Scripture clues are sparse. Bethlehem was crowded with visitors, for Caesar’s decree had ordered people to return to their place of ancestral origin for official government registration. Accommodation in Bethlehem was thus at a premium. The guest rooms at the town’s inn were either full, or perhaps the innkeeper – who is not actually mentioned in Scripture – had qualms about giving hospitality to a woman about to give birth. Either way, Mary

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and Joseph had no choice but to spend the night lodging in the covered shelter provided for animals. Amazingly, it was there – amidst mute beasts and perhaps animal work-hands – that the very Son of God and longed-for Messiah was born. For Mary, this was no doubt both physically distressing and socially humiliating. It was no modern maternity ward, yet the Bible tells us that it was in that animal shelter that Christ was born. There, Mary ‘brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because *there was no room for them in the inn*’ (emphasis mine).

The Reality of Christ’s Birth

Who would ever have thought that the Son of God would have been born in the way that He was? Christ’s birth in an animal shelter just could not have been invented by human imagination. ‘Lo! Within a manger lies, He who built the starry skies.’¹ It shows that the Christian faith is based on history, not mythology. Here we are dealing with reality, not fantasy. Our calendars prove the reality of Christ’s birth every day, for we are living in the twenty-first century A.D. – after the birth of Christ. As Peter wrote some years later, ‘We did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (2 Pet. 1:16).

The Humility of Christ’s Birth

In 2 Corinthians 8:9 we read, ‘For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.’ Theologians divide Christ’s life into two states: His state

1. Edward Caswall, (1814–78)

No room at the Inn

of humiliation and His state of exaltation. His birth in the 'cattle shed' fits into the former category.

'Christ's humiliation consisted in His being born, and that in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time.'²

That there was 'no room in the inn' for Christ tallies with Isaiah's ancient prophecy that 'He is despised and rejected by men' (Isa. 53:3). Christ was rejected at His birth, and then throughout His life. His rejection culminated in His being nailed to a plank of wood and hung up to die, and then for three hours He was even forsaken by God the Father Himself. His rejection, however, wrought our reconciliation. His forsakenness wrought our forgiveness. It was not accidental but providential. It was all part of God's eternal plan to save a people for Himself and for His glory.

The Glory of Christ's Birth

In Jesus, God became man – 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). The Son of God became a son of man that the sons of men might become the sons of God. He was born that we might be born again. He was born to die, so that dying sinners might have eternal life. The incarnation of Christ is a vital link in the chain of salvation history. The gospel proclaims, 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life' (John 3:16).

The glory of Christ's birth stems from the fact that He was born to be our Saviour. 'There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord' (Luke 2:11) –

2. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Question 27

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a Saviour from sin, a Saviour from the wrath of God, a Saviour from eternal hell.

No room at the inn! The glory of Christ's birth is not immediately evident to the eye, but well known to the eye of faith. He was born in unusual circumstances and surroundings – an animal shelter. 'laid ... in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.' It begs the evangelistic question; 'Have you any room for Jesus?'

*Thou didst leave Thy throne
And Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem's home
Was found no room
For Thy holy nativity!*

*O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.*

(EMILY ELLIOTT, 1836–97)

3

The writing is on the wall

The expression 'The writing's on the wall' is commonly used to refer to some envisaged trouble ahead, judging from a present action or situation. For example, 'The writing's on the wall for you if you do not give up smoking.' The expression has even been heard in relation to a football team on a losing streak – 'Relegation surely awaits them. Their current form suggests the writing's on the wall.'

The Divine Graffiti of Daniel

The expression 'the writing is on the wall' originates from the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Daniel relates some divine graffiti, no less – a time when God Himself actually wrote on a wall. The background to all this is as follows:

The people of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar. Many of them – including the godly prophet Daniel – were taken from the promised land into exile in Babylon. The Babylonian exile was a sad time in Israel's history – a time of disruption and sorrow. The holy temple at Jerusalem had been destroyed and the children of Israel found themselves in an alien land, surrounded by idols. Psalm 137:1 gives us an insight into the mood of that time when it relates 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion.'

While in Babylon, the Scriptures record, 'Belshazzar the king made a great feast for a thousand of his lords, and drank wine in the presence of the thousand' (Dan. 5:1). This feast was no polite dinner party, but more like a drunken orgy. As the feast went on,

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Belshazzar got less and less inhibited, and 'While he tasted the wine, Belshazzar gave the command to bring the gold and silver vessels which his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple which had been in Jerusalem, that the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines might drink from them. Then they brought the gold vessels that had been taken from the temple of the house of God which had been in Jerusalem; and the king and his lords, his wives, and his concubines drank from them. They drank wine, and praised the gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone' (Dan. 5:2 ff.).

King Belshazzar thus used the holy vessels of the Jerusalem temple for unholy and idolatrous purposes. In doing so, he revealed his disrespect and even contempt for the God of Israel. Did this matter, though? Was not Belshazzar the king of Babylon, and thus 'free to do his own thing'? No. The Bible then relates the instance of divine graffiti which is the subject of this chapter: 'In the same hour the fingers of a man's hand appeared and wrote opposite the lampstand on the plaster of the wall of the king's palace ...' (Dan. 5:5). King Belshazzar sobered up in an instant. He knew that this was the hand of God in judgment. 'Then the king's countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened and his knees knocked against each other' (Dan. 5:6). 'King Belshazzar was greatly troubled, his countenance was changed, and his lords were astonished' (Dan. 5:9).

When the king's wise men and counsellors failed to interpret the writing on the wall, godly Daniel was brought in before him to explain the words from the divine fingers. Daniel was an intimate friend of the true God, and boldly rebuked and reprimanded Belshazzar for his sacrilege. Daniel was blunt, and told the king, 'the God who holds your breath in His hand and owns

The writing is on the wall

all your ways, you have not glorified' (Dan. 5:23). The words from heaven were 'MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN' (Dan. 5:25). Daniel explained to the king, 'This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians' (Dan. 5:26 ff.). Belshazzar, then, was under the judgment of God. His number was up. He had been weighed in the balances and found wanting. The prophetic 'writing on the wall' was fulfilled without delay. God took away Belshazzar's life and kingship, for, 'That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old' (Dan. 5:30, 31).

'The writing is on the wall ...' Truth be told, the bad news is that 'the writing is on the wall' for us as much as it was for King Belshazzar of Babylon. This is so because we will all die one day and face God in judgment. 'It is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment' (Heb. 9:27). Belshazzar showed contempt for God. But all sin shows contempt for God. All sin dishonours God because sin is a flouting of His commandments and a rebellion against His divine authority. And we are all sinners, for the Bible says, 'There is none righteous, no, not one' (Rom. 3:10); 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23).

Sadly, therefore, 'the writing is on the wall' for each one of us, because we are all sinners in the hands of an angry God who cannot tolerate sin, but only judge it. Is there any hope for us at all then? The Bible says that there is, because there is a gospel of divine grace. The Christian gospel proclaims that we may escape from the judgment of God through the mercy of God. He actually sent His own Son into the world to die in the place of

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sinner and turn aside His wrath from against them. The death of Christ at Calvary is the ultimate expression of both the love and the wrath of God, for, because of Calvary, God is able both to condemn sin and spare the sinner who believes in Jesus. 'But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8).

Yes, we deserve to be punished for our sins – but there is a Saviour! 'Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come' (1 Thess. 1:10). The Bible affirms that if our faith is in Jesus and His atoning death for our sins, sinners though we are, all is eternally well with us. Jesus was judged for our justification. He was condemned for our eternal consolation. 'There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:1).

'The writing's on the wall ...' It was for King Belshazzar in ancient Babylon, and it is for every one of us today. Hence the urgency of the evangelistic task. Hence the absolute necessity of saving faith in Jesus.

4

The powers that be

'Daft. Due to Health and Safety Regulations, the powers that be have forbidden children to hold conker matches in the school playground.' *'The powers that be have put a speed camera on the road near me.'* *'I was looking forward to retiring, but the powers that be have gone and raised the retirement age.'*

We use the term 'the powers that be' to refer to some rules, regulations or laws that have come our way, which we have no choice but to obey if we do not want to land ourselves in trouble. If we do not like, or do not see the point or purpose of the rule, such obedience can 'grate on us'. But we give our reluctant assent to the anonymous legislators who have stipulated what is to be so. We thus go along with 'the powers that be'.

The expression 'the powers that be' originates in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Romans in the New Testament. Here, the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives us what is to be the Christian attitude to the government of the day under which we find ourselves. In Romans 13:1, Paul states 'the powers that be [that is, human government] are ordained of God' (KJV). This being so, Paul enjoins submission and obedience to the government of the day because, seeing as government is 'of God', rebellion against the civil government is actually rebellion against God. Christians, therefore, are to be characterized by civic and civil responsibility. They are to be upright, law-abiding citizens of the country in which God has placed them, helping, rather than hindering its smooth running. Paul's full statement

and explanation of our attitude towards ‘the powers that be’ is as follows:

‘Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour’ (Rom. 13:1-7, KJV).

Lawful Authority

The Bible teaches that it is the will of God that we all obey the lawful authority ordained by God, whether this authority is invested in our parents, teachers, pastors, employer, the police or the government of the day. All are ordained for our benefit. The God of the Bible is the ultimate Authority – but He exercises this authority by delegating it to human beings. The God of the Bible is a God of law and order and states ‘Let all things be done decently and in order’ (1 Cor. 14:40). The opposite of law and order is lawlessness and disorder. When the harmonious way of heaven is cast aside, the misery and anarchy of hell is sure to ensue. Christians are thus to be subject to the government of

The powers that be

the day, even when they do not personally like the 'colours' of the government of the day.

When Paul wrote Romans 13, the Emperor Nero was in power. Nero had a pathological hatred of Christians and eventually took Paul's life. But Paul still enjoined submission. He never encouraged so-called 'civil disobedience'. God had put Nero in power. He and his officers were there to restrain evil and promote good. Rather than opening our mouths to complain about the government, or getting on our feet to protest against the government, the Bible would rather have us get on our knees to pray for the government: Pray that its members would seek wisdom from God and legislate in a way pleasing to Him. Pray that conditions conducive to the spread of the gospel would be promoted. We remember (in the famous words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson) that 'More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.' Hence Paul wrote to Timothy, 'Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence' (1 Tim. 2:1, 2).

Is it ever right to rebel?

Christians, then, are subject to 'the powers that be'. Unquestioningly and uncritically so? Not quite. There is one exception to this. If the government orders us to disobey the revealed will of God in the Bible, it has overstepped its mark. If the government of the day orders us to do something contrary to God's Word, we may disobey out of obedience to the Higher Authority – out of obedience to God Himself. An example of this occurred during the life of the early church. Christ had commanded His people to preach the gospel. The religious authorities 'called

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them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them, “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge” (Acts 4:18, 19). Needless to say, the apostles carried on preaching the gospel. They rebelled against the human authority when it clashed with the divine. Such is incumbent on all Christians if needs be. ‘We ought to obey God rather than men’ (Acts 5:29).

Martyrdom

The early Christians generally submitted to ‘the powers that be’ – the Roman government of their day. When they were required to offer incense to Caesar, though, and say, ‘Caesar is Lord,’ conscience forbade their doing so. Their conviction was that ‘Jesus is Lord.’ Worshipping Caesar would have meant committing the sin of idolatry. They thus rebelled, and their rebellion cost them their lives. They were martyred for the Christian faith – literally, thrown to the lions...

May God give us grace to follow Christ whatever the consequence or cost. We, under God, are subject to ‘the powers that be’. But our ultimate allegiance is to King Jesus the ‘KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS’ (Rev. 19:16) to whom, one day, every knee shall bow.