

The Young People's Magazine

**Issued by the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland
Reformed in Doctrine, Worship and Practice**

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them” Ecclesiastes 12:1



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Contents

Irrelevant?	63
John and Mary	66
Abraham – the Friend of God:	
1. Reconciliation to God Is Necessary	68
God Was There	70
What the Bible Teaches About Sin:	
5. Objections	72
For Younger Readers:	
Things to Listen for	75
“Do You Love Me?”	76
For Junior Readers:	
The Cask of Oil and the Bible	77
Looking Around Us	79
The Christian’s Golden Calf	80

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Irrelevant?

Few people in Britain today are serious about religion. And if you went round speaking to them, I suspect that the word they would most often use about religion is *irrelevant*. They feel that they do not need it, that it has nothing useful to say to them, that it would do them no good if they got involved with it. They imagine that they have many better things to do with their time. They are not likely to know many people who are sincerely religious; indeed lots of them will never have watched, at close quarters, anyone living a godly life in dependence on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Even if they have attended a church service, it was very likely conducted by an unconverted minister – someone who did not know God personally. Very possibly he did not regard the Bible as a message from God telling people how they should live. Such a minister loses sight of the significance of one of the most basic facts about human life – that “all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). So there must be something fundamentally wrong with his message; it cannot come across as really relevant to himself or to those who are listening to him. Especially he cannot feel his need of Jesus Christ as the Saviour, nor can he convey to those who hear him a sense of their need of this Saviour and how wonderfully suitable He is to them all as sinners.

The singing at the church may be attractive, both the minister and the congregation may be very friendly, but those attending a service will have very easy access to any amount of music which they enjoy much better and may have many friends whose company they much prefer. It is not surprising if the visitor concludes that religion is irrelevant to his or her needs; it has not spoken to their heart.

At the same time, we cannot be at all sure that a visitor to a church where the true gospel is preached will recognise its relevance. We must remember that Satan is busy blinding the eyes of those who do not believe. People do not like to be told that they are sinners; nor do they want to be told that they cannot earn their own salvation, but must be completely dependent on God for forgiveness and for every other spiritual blessing. Yet we must bear in

mind that nothing is too hard for the Lord; He is able to bring even the most ignorant sinner to Himself.

One thing is sure: sinners who decide that true religion is irrelevant can never find true, lasting satisfaction anywhere else – no matter what efforts they make to find such satisfaction in the world and its entertainments. But let such sinners open their eyes to see the wickedness that surrounds them and, more particularly, the wickedness that is in their own hearts. Then they can have no hope. But can they really convince themselves that death is the end of their existence, and that there is no eternity beyond? John Flavel was one of the best-known ministers in south-west England in the 1600s; he believed that it could be written on the grave of most people who perish in their sins: “Here lies one that was destroyed by despair”.

But why should anyone despair, when the good news of salvation – the gospel – is within reach? Sin is a reality in every life; death is a reality at the end of every life; and beyond death is the reality of eternity; and for those who reject the gospel it is the reality of endless punishment. But the gospel, which is at the very centre of true religion, is relevant to every sinner. Jesus Christ tells us in the gospel that “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). No one has any right to say, That is irrelevant to me.

Focus for a moment on the word *whosoever*; it points to anyone and everyone. Anyone who believes in Christ will be saved; he or she will not perish. That is anyone without restriction – any sinner whatever. Everyone who believes in Christ will be saved; they will not perish. It means that if *you* believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved; you will not perish; you will not have to spend eternity in hell; you will enjoy the eternal blessedness of heaven at last. How wonderfully relevant this is to the most miserable human being who has the least contact with the teaching of Scripture!

Most people today reject God; they do not trouble to pray to Him; they know it is not something they would enjoy doing. One important reason is that unholy human beings do not want to be in contact with a Being who is perfectly holy and might disturb their consciences. Yet “man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7); in other words, it is something entirely natural for human beings to be in trouble; it is bound to happen to everyone more or less often. And those who reject God have to endure their troubles without having Him as a refuge to flee to in times of trouble – they have never experienced the power of believing prayer.

Others have been rescued from their rejection of God; they have come to Him through faith in Jesus Christ. They know where to go in their troubles;

they have begun to obey the call: “Let us . . . come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). It is a call to come in prayer to the throne where Christ sits, who has everything under His control. So He has control over trouble of every kind, including death, disease, worry and difficult relationships. We are invited to bring all these difficulties to Him. He is able to help us; He is even able to take the trouble away completely; but even if He does not take it away, He is able to give us grace to endure it. No one who has experienced that grace will call religion irrelevant.

In 1685, during a time of persecution in Scotland, the Earl of Argyll was sentenced to death. He was a believer, and so he knew his way to the throne of grace; he knew what it is to go in prayer before the King who sits on the throne of grace and to cast all his concerns upon Him. The day when he was to be beheaded came round. He told his sister that he was assured of his salvation and that he longed “to be with Christ, which is far better”. We are told that, about an hour before he was to be executed, he had a meal “with great cheerfulness” and then went for a nap.

A government official came to speak to him and would not believe that Argyll was asleep. Someone opened the door of his room quietly and the official was amazed to find that he had been told the truth; he could scarcely believe that anyone could be so calm when so close to death. The official rushed home quite disturbed at what he had seen; he exclaimed, “Argyll within an hour of eternity, and sleeping as pleasantly as a child!”

The official’s conscience told him that he could not have been as calm if he had been in that situation; it seems fairly obvious that his sins were not forgiven. But Argyll had seen that true religion is relevant – not only when death is quickly approaching, but at every point of life. One can only suppose that the official had never before seen the relevance of true religion to all of life; so he had not sought the Lord for the salvation of his soul. One hopes that he truly grasped the relevance of true religion that very day and sought the Lord seriously and urgently.

But the main reason why religion is relevant to everyone is the fact that God created us; so it is our duty to worship Him. In an age when most people assume that evolution is a fact – and that everything came into existence by chance – the One who created us is ignored. But “we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:10). Then no one can ignore God or consider true religion irrelevant. But then it will be too late to be reconciled to Him. How much better *now* to obey the call: “Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while he is near: let the wicked forsake his way . . . and let him return unto the Lord” (Isaiah 55:6).

John and Mary

John and Mary lived in a little house in the north of England. They never went to church; they never read the Bible; they never prayed. Every week-day John worked hard in a woollen mill; at weekends he would get drunk in the public house nearest his home. Then his wife would appear at the door, and he would know that it was time to go home. By now John would not be at all steady on his feet; time and again, as he would stagger towards home, he would stumble and fall. Mary never touched alcohol and she would scold John for wasting their money in the public house; then she would order him to get up at once. In later life Mary confessed: "We lived like pigs, and worse than pigs, though we were thought to be as good as our neighbours. Many of them died in ignorance and sin, and I can never tell how it was that God spared John and me."

One Sabbath evening Mary was wandering about the streets. She spotted a notice inviting poor people who did not go to church to come in to a service. She later described what happened: "I stood still and read it, saying to myself: 'Chapel for the Destitute! Chapel for the Destitute! This is a new shop, and I think it is the shop for me, for I am destitute enough in all conscience, and I will see if they will let me in.' I went in and saw scores as poor as myself." When the people "began to sing", she went on, "I began to cry. I never was so affected in my life. . . . After singing, the minister began to read out of the Bible the thirteenth chapter of Luke. I shall never forget that chapter.

"When he was reading that part which said, 'Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish,' I thought, 'Well, I have done some things which I had better not have done, but I am not as bad as some that are here, by a long way'. But when he came to that part which says, 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate,' he stopped and, looking at us all, he said, 'How many are doing what Christ here commands – striving? There is a time when we may enter the way to heaven, and a time when we cannot. When the door is shut, we may strive, but then we shall strive in vain.' I felt very strange when he was reading and speaking. 'I am not striving,' I thought, 'nor is our John, and if heaven's door is shut on us, it will be a very sad thing.'

"Before I came out of that place that night, I began to think I was as bad as anybody in it. I went home and told our John all about the chapel and what I had heard, and I said to him, 'I can understand yon man, every word he says: he neither talks about Jews and Gentiles, but about Jesus Christ coming to seek and save lost sinners; that we are all sinners, and that Christ died to save sinners, and that, except we repent and receive this salvation, the door will be shut and we shall perish.'

“I was in good earnest while I was telling our John, and was vexed to see that he did not seem to care.” But she went on to tell John that, if she would live until the next Sabbath, she would go again to the chapel. And she insisted, “Thou shalt go with me”.

But John did not go. Nor did he go the Sabbath after that. But Mary kept speaking about the chapel and what she heard there. She told her husband as much as she could remember about the Bible readings and the sermons. She tried to make him promise to go with her, and at last he agreed. But she was very much afraid that he would change his mind; so she got Matthew Shepherd, an old man who lived nearby, to call at their home a little before the time of the service and encourage John to come. They succeeded, and all three of them set off for the chapel together. John was slightly deaf, so Mary brought him down near the front of the building and they sat as near the preacher as possible. Both John and Mary listened very carefully.

On their way home, Mary asked John how he liked the service. Then she added: “Is it not true that we have been living like pigs?”

“Well, I do not think I shall go again”, John answered.

“Why?” His wife asked, very disappointed.

“Well, I don’t like to be made uneasy, and I felt very much so tonight. If what we heard be true, I have been wrong a long time.”

It was a foolish response, but Mary answered him well: “It *is* true, John, and we have both been living as if we had no souls, and it is quite time we began to cry for mercy, if it be not too late. And I do hope God will pardon us both, for I feel I cannot do as I am.”

John Ashworth, who first wrote about them, said, “I was glad when I heard of the conversion of the old couple, but was still more pleased when I was informed that they had begun to pray together . . . and to ask others to pray with them. The Spirit of God had wounded their consciences and troubled their souls, and is it not a mercy when sinners, high or low, rich or poor, are troubled on account of their sins? It is a fearful thing when a man is so hardened in his crimes that he is past feeling.”

John and Mary grew old and frail. When he prayed, John still insisted on going down on his knees, although it was now impossible for him to get back on his feet without help. No one could persuade him that, now when he was getting so weak, it would be better for him to stay in his seat or to stand. He had a strong feeling that in prayer he ought to bow down, not only in his soul, but also in his body.

After the prayer Mary would come to him and help him to his feet. It used to be so different. When John would fall down drunk, Mary would do nothing to help him; she would just scold him for his foolishness. Now she

would lovingly give him all the help she could. What a change grace had made in them both!

The time came for Mary to die and her last words were: "Mercy's free". John was left behind, but he lost his memory. He did not remember that Mary had died. He would ask her to sing; he would talk to her about the chapel; he would wonder when his old friend Matthew would call for him to take him there; he would say that if no one would come for him, he would try to go himself. But there was no one to answer. Yet he would pray for the people who went to the chapel; he would pray for those who went to visit the sick and the poor; and he would pray to be taken soon to heaven.

Ashworth wrote about John and Mary before that prayer was answered. But he was sure that "soon that prayer will be heard". And he added, "I believe that, when the pages are read in the Lamb's Book of Life, on these pages will be found the names of John and Mary."

Abraham – the Friend of God

1. Reconciliation to God Is Necessary

Rev Neil M Ross

This series of articles is based on a lecture given at the 2011 Youth Conference. It is intended to highlight some lessons from the life of Abraham.

Abraham (or Abram as he was first known) was one of the most remarkable men in history. He was nineteenth in line from Adam, a direct descendant of Shem, Noah's son. And, through his son Isaac, he was the forefather of the Great Jewish people. From him also most of the Arab nations are descended, through his son Ishmael and six other sons.

Abraham is particularly famous as the ancestor, again through Isaac, of that one Seed, Jesus Christ, of whom God said to Abraham: "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 22:18; 26:4).

The main events of his life are these: around 4000 years ago, he was born in the city of Ur beside the River Euphrates. (Ur no longer exists but it was sited about 100 miles north-west of present day Basra in Iraq). He lived there until he was about 70, when at the call of God he migrated with his wife Sarah and a large household some 300 miles northward to Haran (Acts 7:4). About five years later he left Haran for Canaan (Genesis 12:4), and settled in Sichem (Genesis 12:6). When famine struck Canaan, he went to Egypt (Genesis 12:10) but soon returned and encamped at Bethel (Genesis 13:3).

A separation occurred between himself and his nephew Lot, and their households (Genesis 13:11), but when he heard later that Lot was captured

by invaders, he pursued them and rescued Lot (Genesis 14:15). After this, God made a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18) and promised great blessings to him and his descendants. As there was no sign of a son being born to himself and Sarah, he took Hagar, Sarah's maid, as his secondary wife (Genesis 16:1ff). A son Ishmael was born to him by her (Genesis 16:15).

Some 15 years later, when Abraham was 99, God renewed His covenant with him and changed his name from Abram ("exalted father"), to Abraham ("father of a multitude") (Genesis 17:1ff). At this time Abraham observed the rite of male circumcision in his household as God appointed (Genesis 17:23). We see next that he was visited by angels and witnessed the destruction of Sodom and the other "cities of the plain" (Genesis 19:28). He then moved to Gerar (Genesis 20:1) where he was rebuked by King Abimelech for giving the false impression that Sarah was not his wife but his sister.

The next main event occurred when he was 100: the promised and long-awaited birth of a son, Isaac, to himself and Sarah (Genesis 21:1ff). When Isaac, yet a child, was ill-treated by his step-brother Ishmael (Gal 4:29), Abraham sent away Ishmael with his mother Hagar to live elsewhere (Genesis 21:9ff). Some years later, Abraham, at the command of God, travelled to Mount Moriah to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice, but God stopped him at the last moment; Abraham had demonstrated his obedience (Genesis 22:1ff).

Abraham was 137 when his beloved Sarah died (Genesis 23:1ff). Three years later, he sent his servant to find a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1ff); he himself married Keturah, by whom he had six more sons (Genesis 25:1ff). He died at the great age of 175 and was buried in Machpelah near Hebron (Genesis 25:8). These few terse statements sum up a life which by any measure was extraordinarily great.

Abraham is especially noted for his friendship with God. During the 105 years he lived after he left his native Ur, he travelled vast distances, lived in many places, and had repeated and most profound experiences when God appeared to him and spoke to him.

Thus it was true of Abraham – as it was of Moses – that the Lord spoke to him "face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Three times in Scripture he is presented as the friend of God. All true believers are the friends of God in some sense, but only Abraham is specifically called "the Friend of God".

It is Abraham's *friendship with God* that we shall mainly focus on as we trace the path of his pilgrimage and seek to learn lessons from his life. His friendship with God was shown by his faith in God, separation from the ungodly, obedience to God, communion with Him, and glorifying Him. These must be features of our lives too if we are to be friends of God.

So the first lesson is this: *everyone must be a friend of God and therefore must be reconciled to Him*. Even those who profess that, by the grace of God, they are His friends must examine themselves as to the evidence of this relationship. Do they show themselves to be truly His friends? "A man that hath friends must show himself friendly" (Proverbs 18:24).

Abraham was truly the friend of God, as Scripture shows. Not only does James 2:23 say that Abraham "was called the Friend of God", God Himself called him "Abraham My friend" (Isaiah 41:8). And King Jehoshaphat, in prayer to God, spoke of him as "Abraham Thy friend" (2 Chronicles 20:7).

But how does one become a friend of God? Abraham became the friend of God because God first befriended him and reconciled him to Himself. God sovereignly chose him and then called him and redeemed him. The Levites in Nehemiah's time praised God saying, "Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram" (Nehemiah 9:7), and in Isaiah 29:22 we are told that the Lord "redeemed Abraham". Other sinners in Ur needed to be befriended by God and reconciled to Him, but only Abraham was called at that time. God said, "I called him alone, and blessed him" (Isaiah 51:2).

Unconverted people need to be brought into this blessed friendship with God because as enemies of God they deserve to be punished for ever. They must seek that God would have mercy on them, call them effectually and reconcile them to Himself. How appropriate then that they would pray,

"Remember me, Lord, with that love
which Thou to Thine dost bear;
With Thy salvation, O my God,
to visit me draw near" (metrical Psalm 104:4).

When God reconciles a sinner to Himself, He does so by bringing him to believe in Christ, the only Mediator between God and men. "Therefore being justified by faith," Paul tells believers, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). How much sinners need *faith* if they are to be reconciled to God as "faithful Abraham" was.

God Was There

The old church was in a bad state of repair. It had been built, in Virginia, about 50 years before. Then a minister came to the church and God blessed his preaching. But after some years, the minister died and now no services were held there any more. The doors had fallen off their hinges and birds were nesting on the walls. The pulpit, where once the good news of salvation had been proclaimed, was now almost collapsing.

Nearby there was a pub, which was where the men of the district met on a Sabbath instead of going to church. Among the young men who gathered in that pub was the son of a wealthy man who lived not far away. On his way to the pub one Sabbath, this young man happened to look in through the open doorway of the church and he saw an old man sitting alone on one of the benches. The sight of the old man and the empty church made him feel uncomfortable about spending his time in the company of the other men in the pub – it must have touched his conscience – so he turned his horse round and rode back home.

But he obviously got over his uncomfortable feeling before the next Sabbath, because that day saw him again making his way past the church in the same direction. As he rode by, he saw the old man sitting on his bench leaning his head on his walking stick. The sight of the old man sitting alone must have struck him as strange, for he rode up to a window and asked the man what he was doing there.

“Get down, young master,” the old man told him, “and come and sit down and I will tell you.”

So he came down from his horse, walked in through the open doorway and sat down beside the old man. By now he had recognised the old man, a black, as a servant of a planter nearby.

The old man was quite moved as he began to explain that, 30 years before then, he used to come to this church each Sabbath “to meet God and His people”. He went on: “Precious times we have had here. This house used to be filled with professed Christians, engaged in the service of God, and anxious sinners enquiring the way to be saved. In that old pulpit, now leaning, ready to fall, used to stand a servant of God, telling us the precious truths of the gospel of Jesus. Now he is dead; some of the members have moved away, some gone back to the world, and some are dead, while the old house is ready to fall. Young master, I used to come here to meet God. I have come here today to meet Him in this house, and He has met with me. He is here now.”

It may have seemed pointless for the old man to come to the empty church, but it was a place where he could meditate on the things of God and pray to Him. It was clearly not in vain, for God had spoken to him. Besides, he found someone to whom he could speak profitably. He earnestly tried to impress on the young man the importance of true religion and the danger of neglecting it. He went on: “Young master, you see my head, it is white. I was once young like you. I am now old and soon shall die. And you will die too. Are you prepared?”

Clearly the young man was not prepared. But these words went into his heart and he broke down in tears. The old man suggested that they should

kneel down and pray for the salvation of his soul. They did so, and it was clear that God was there.

During the next week, the young man continued to be disturbed about his soul. Early the next Sabbath morning he returned to the deserted church to seek out the old man, who spoke to him about Jesus as “the way, the truth, and the life”. A few days later the young man believed that he was now looking to the Saviour for salvation.

Flowing from that one conversion, there was a widespread revival. A new congregation was organised; the church building was repaired; and many people were converted there. Among them were six men who later became useful ministers; the Lord blessed their efforts to make known the great truths about salvation through a crucified Saviour.

One can easily imagine the old man feeling very sad as he thought back on better days in his district when, each week, he could look forward to hearing the gospel preached the next Sabbath in the church. These blessed days had come to an end. Yet God did not forsake His child. Though it was not so pleasant to sit on his own in the empty, run-down church, God was there. God still met with him as he meditated and prayed alone. And He heard this godly old man's prayers.

However unlikely it may seem to us today that God will answer our prayers, we should never give up. These words, spoken to Jeremiah long ago about the people of God, are still true: “Their Redeemer is strong; the Lord of hosts is His name” (Jeremiah 50:34).

What the Bible Teaches About Sin

5. Objections

Charles Hodge

Another article shortened from the book, *The Way of Life*. Last month's article warned against stifling conviction of sin – and so striving against the Holy Spirit.

Another cause of carelessness is people making objections against the truth. The objections are often obstacles in the way of those seeking salvation, or they put to sleep the consciences of those who want to be deceived. People object that we are what God made us and our character is moulded by our circumstances, so we cannot be responsible for it. Again, they say, it is pointless to use any means to escape God's judgement, since what is to be will be; so we must wait till God sees fit to change our hearts, since Scripture declares it is *His* work.

These objections involve trying to reconcile different truths, not whether

they are true separately. It is easy to show that everyone does believe that they are responsible for their moral character. We condemn ourselves or clear ourselves because we are conscious of this truth. No one really doubts it. Yet our character partly does depend on circumstances beyond our control – on our education, on the habits of people around us, on God’s influence. Here are two facts resting on independent evidence. Each is certain, and each by itself is generally accepted. Yet we see people constantly wanting to pit one against the other and argue against their responsibility because they are dependent on God, or against their dependence because they are responsible.

Similarly everyone agrees that man is a free agent. We can no more doubt it than we can doubt that we exist. Alongside this truth is the conviction that we cannot force ourselves to change our beliefs or our feelings, although everyone is responsible for them. Perhaps no one can see the harmony of these truths; yet they are truths. Everyone accepts them in practice.

Again, all experience teaches us that we must use means; so we seek in some way for knowledge, religion and happiness; if we do not use the means, we will not gain the knowledge or religion or happiness we want. Yet there is no certain connection between the means and the end; God holds the result in His hands, according to His sovereign pleasure. In their ordinary affairs people submit to this; they do not hesitate to use means, though the result is beyond their control. But in religion they think the uncertainty of the result is a sufficient excuse for neglecting the means.

Again, if I do not know how to reconcile the goodness of God with the existence of evil, must I deny all the evidence for that goodness? Must I deny that I am a moral being because I cannot change my character? God does not require us to believe without evidence, but He does require us to believe what we cannot understand and what we cannot reconcile with other facts. After all, there are many facts in nature which no one can yet understand. So what should we expect when we think of spiritual things? Who can understand how the soul and body influence each other? Why should shame make the cheeks blush, or fear make the heart beat faster?

If there are so many things in ourselves that we cannot grasp, how can we expect to understand God, to know why He acts as He does, or always to reconcile His works with what is revealed about Him? To do this we would have to know God better than we do ourselves. We would have to understand His purposes and how He brings them about. “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man that is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11). So we, the lowest of God’s intelligent creatures, must expect to live by faith – to receive as true, on His authority, much that we cannot reconcile.

God does not require blind belief. We do not have to believe anything without suitable evidence; yet we must not reject anything just because we cannot understand it. We must not reject God's existence, because we do not fully know what self-existence means; we must not deny His omnipresence, because we cannot see how a being can be in all places at once. God shows us how to take each successive step towards heaven, though He may not make us able to understand the Almighty unto perfection.

It may be said that we have not answered any objection. But we have done something far better if we have made the reader feel his need of a humble, trustful spirit towards God. This is the proper state of mind for every learner, especially in Christ's school. The weakness of our powers and the difficulty of what has to be learned make this state of mind, not only reasonable, but necessary. Faith without evidence is senseless; so is unbelief in spite of evidence. Some people resist the truth as long as they can; others are willing to admit the force of proof as far as they see it. This is the only way in which true knowledge can be obtained. But we must reject nothing simply because we do not know how it is consistent with other truths.

There can be no higher ground for faith than God's authority. It was enough for the writers of the Bible that God asserted a truth. We too should quietly submit to all that God says and does. Some people complain, Why were we born in a state of sin, or in a world in which sin is everywhere? It may be impossible for us to answer this. But as the fact stares us in the face, is there any use in denying it? They further ask: How can we be responsible? Whatever difficulty there may be in it, there is no doubt about the fact. We cannot free ourselves from the conviction that we *are* responsible. Let us remember that we do not know everything. So we must trust God and feel assured that what He says is true and that what He does is right. Though "clouds and darkness are round about Him, righteousness and judgement are the habitation of His throne".

These objections are almost always dishonest – people make them though convinced they are false. If someone pleads his inability as an excuse for not repenting and obeying God, he knows his plea is not right. He knows that, however unable he is to obey God fully, this is no excuse for continuing in sin – for he feels a sense of guilt. His plea fails in his own conscience, and he knows it will be of no use before God. So when people object to the strictness of God's law, their conscience tells them that it is righteous. They know that, as God is infinitely wise and good, it is right to regard Him with supreme love and submit to all His commands.

God's voice has an authority we cannot resist. When He tells us we are sinners, we know it is true. When He tells us we are worthy of death, we

know it is a righteous judgement. When He tells us we have no strength to save ourselves and that our salvation depends on His will, we know it is so. So it is both foolish and wicked to object against the truth.

Such is the power of truth that neither the natural hardness of the heart, nor the lack of thought, nor efforts to suppress serious thoughts, can suppress the secret conviction in every unconverted mind that they are on the road to eternal death. This conviction is often very weak. When people are absorbed with the world, it is overlooked. Still it rises up to trouble them. Nor can the suggestion that God is merciful, and may not strictly mark iniquity, quieten this uneasy thought. But the conviction remains that those who commit sin deserve death. So the vague feeling of coming wrath, in spite of all their efforts, still haunts the unconverted.

Most people are forced to admit that they are not fit to die in their present state. They plead: “Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season I will call for thee”. Conscience is more easily deceived by this plea than by any other. It is the most dangerous snare for souls. They do not reflect on the wickedness of pleading with God for liberty to be allowed to break His commandments a little longer. They do not realise that every such plea greatly deepens their guilt. Nor do they consider that the difficulty of returning to God is increased by delay. If repentance is awkward today, it will be more so tomorrow. If the heart is hard now, it will become yet harder through neglect. If the power of sin is too strong for us to resist now, it will become still stronger by giving in to sin. Every day of putting off repentance increases fearfully the probability of being lost for ever.

For Younger Readers

Things to Listen for

Do you find it difficult to understand what you hear in church? Perhaps you do. But you should try to listen for things that you know already. If you do so, you may learn a little more. Those who know a lot, have learned what they know little by little.

Try to listen for names that you know – like Joseph or David, or Paul or Peter, or Mary or Martha. If you hear the minister mention them, you may learn a little more about them.

Do you remember hearing about Joseph? Do you know about the coat of many colours that his father made for him? Do you know how Joseph’s brothers hated him and sold him to a group of men on camels who carried him far away? But then you may hear a little more about Joseph – that God

was always with him, that God did not forget him, that God always took care of him and helped him.

Do you know about David fighting Goliath? Do you know that God helped David, although Goliath was such a great giant? If you hear the minister speaking about David and listen carefully, you may learn something more about him. You may then learn that David loved God and tried to do what God wanted. That is how you should live too.

You should also listen for verses from the Bible which you have learned. Do you know the verse: "Come unto Me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28)? These were the words of the Lord Jesus.

Here are the words of Paul: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved". You should learn these verses by heart and then try to listen for them in church.

"Do You Love Me?"

The service had already begun. The old minister was now preaching to his people, in his church in Virginia, USA. He saw a man walk into the church and sit down. The man was well-dressed but he looked very sad. He listened seriously to the sermon and sometimes a tear slid down his cheek. Afterwards the two men spoke. The minister asked, "How is it that I meet a Jew in a Christian church?"

The man went on to say something about this life. He had a good education, he told the minister. Later he left London, with his books and his wealth, and settled down by the Ohio River with his lovely daughter, who was just 17. His wife had already died before he crossed the Atlantic and he poured out all his love on this one daughter. She was a very pleasant young lady who could speak several languages. As a strict Jew, he had brought her up to follow his religion carefully.

Tragically, the daughter became pale and weak; she was seriously ill. It was clear that death could not be far away. The father often tried to talk to her, but mostly all he could do was cry. He called in doctors; it did not matter to him how much their visits cost; but they could do nothing to reverse the progress of the disease.

One day he was taking a walk in a wood near his home, when a message came to him from his daughter. He entered her bedroom with a heavy heart, fully expecting that the time had come when they would have to say their final farewells to each other.

She stretched out her cold hand to grasp his. "My father," she asked, "do you love me?"

He told her: "You know that I love you, that you are more dear to me than all the world beside".

Then she asked again: "But, my father, do you love me?"

"Why, my child, will you give me pain? Have I never given you any proof of my love?"

"But, my dearest father," she asked once more, "do you love me?"

Her father was too moved to answer; so she went on: "I know you have always loved me; you have been the kindest of parents and I tenderly love you. Will you grant one request? It is the dying request of your daughter."

"My dearest child, ask what you will, though it will take every farthing of my property. Whatever it may be, it shall be granted. I will grant it."

The time had come for her to tell him what she wanted. "My dear father," she pleaded, "I beg you never again to speak against Jesus of Nazareth."

The father was too shocked to speak. But his daughter went on: "I know very little about this Jesus, but I was never taught. But I know that He is a Saviour, for He has made Himself known to me since I have been sick, even for the salvation of my soul. I believe He will save me, though I have never before loved Him. I feel that I am going to Him, that I shall ever be with Him. And now, my dear father, do not deny me; I beg that you will never again speak against this Jesus of Nazareth. I plead with you to obtain a Testament that tells of Him, and I pray that you may know Him, and that, when I am no more, you may give Him the love that used to be mine."

The effort of speaking was too much for her. She had to stop. And it was impossible for her father to say anything at all. He left the room, very much disturbed. Soon someone came to tell him that his daughter had died.

The first thing he did after the funeral was to buy a New Testament. He read it. And he, we are told, "taught by the Spirit from above, is now numbered among the meek and happy followers of Christ".

For Junior Readers

The Cask of Oil and the Bible

I wonder if you really appreciate your Bible. Do you value it as the Word of God to your soul? Are you thankful to have it in your own language, so that you can read it for yourself? This was not always possible even in Scotland less than 200 years ago.

The Isle of Lewis at that time was an area of great spiritual darkness; the

people knew very little about God and His ways. The ministers knew very little themselves and were not able to teach the people much. But some Gaelic teachers went to some far-away places to teach the people to read the Bible in their own language, and the Lord blessed their work.

One person who benefited from this was a teenager from Uig called Malcolm MacRitchie. Someone loaned him a New Testament in Gaelic. Through reading it, his conscience was pricked; he now knew that he was a sinner. Now he really wanted a Bible of his own, a complete Bible.

At that time there were only two Bibles in Uig; one was in the church and the other was in the manse. What could Malcolm do?

He then heard that there were Gaelic Bibles for sale in Stornoway. But these were days before there were proper roads on the island; so Malcolm set off on foot and walked 30 miles across the moors to get to Stornoway. Can you imagine how difficult that would have been, and how long it would have taken him?

When he arrived in Stornoway, he found out where the Bibles were being sold. At last, he hoped, he was going to obtain his longed-for Bible. But what a disappointment! The Bibles cost five shillings and Malcolm did not have enough money. How sad he was as he left Stornoway and made his way back over the moors to Uig! Still he had no Bible!

Soon after this he was wandering along by the shore when he noticed something in the water. He waded out to see what it was and found that it was a cask containing palm oil. It must have fallen off a ship and drifted on the waves to Uig.

He went to report his find at the Custom House in Stornoway and was rewarded for his honesty. He was given five shillings! Was that not wonderful? He now had exactly the right amount of money to go and buy his own Bible. How happy he was as he returned home with his treasure!

How eager Malcolm was to read the whole Word of God. And he did not keep it to himself. As news of his Bible spread, the neighbours started gathering to hear him read it. So his Bible was a blessing to others as well as to himself. When the well-known godly minister, Alexander Macleod, came to Uig in 1824, Malcolm was able to help him. He later became a minister of the gospel himself.

Should you not value your Bible as Malcolm did? Should you not pray that it would be blessed to your soul? Then you would use the words of Psalm 119:

“The word that cometh from Thy mouth is better unto me
Than many thousands and great sums of gold and silver be”.

J van Kralingen

Looking Around Us

“Not Church”

In the United States, very few people, just 4%, label themselves as atheists (who say that there definitely is no God) or agnostics (who claim that it is impossible to know if God exists). All the others – the remaining 96% – claim to have some religion. Very many of them profess Christianity.

Increasing numbers, it seems, are forsaking the organised churches. An article about them in a recent issue of *Time* magazine had the title: “The Rise of the Nones”. If you asked them: What church do you belong to? presumably they would answer, None. The article described a gathering of people from the United States, on a Sabbath, in La Mision, a town in Mexico. There was prayer, there was religious conversation, and there was a sermon. They call the gathering *Not Church*; presumably it is just a little bit organised!

The sermon was about tomatoes and God’s call to Samuel. Organised religion, the preacher claimed, can be like supermarket tomatoes – flavourless and tough. “That isn’t a reason,” the people were told, “to give up on religion or tomatoes, but instead to find a fresh local version worth cultivating.” What was said about Samuel, or God’s call to him, we are not told. Possibly it was not as striking as the comparison between religion and tomatoes.

There is no doubt that much is wrong in the organised churches in America and elsewhere. They need to return to the Bible. What was significant about Samuel was that, when God called, he obeyed as soon as he understood that God was speaking to him. Then he answered, almost as Eli directed him, “Speak; for Thy servant heareth”. God was speaking, and Samuel was listening. That is how individuals and Churches should react to God speaking through the Bible today. The problem about much organised religion is that it does not listen to God speaking through the Bible. And one suspects that Not Church too is not very good at listening to God.

One problem is that the preacher, an ordained minister, is a woman. But, if we listen to God speaking in the Bible, we will learn that women have no authority to teach in public worship. We have no right to pick and choose what parts of the Bible we will listen to. In every part of our own lives, we must submit to everything that God says. And in every part of its life, the Church must submit to everything God says.

Yet this minister believes that the Not Church members are “not rejecting God. They’re rejecting organised religion as being rigid.” If she had said that they are rejecting organised religion because it is rigidly unscriptural, one would understand them walking away. Religion should be as rigid as the Bible – in other words, as rigid as God has commanded; no more so and no less.

The Christian's Golden Calf

John Newton reflects on Exodus 32

When Israel heard the fiery law
from Sinai's top proclaimed,
Their hearts seemed full of holy awe,
their stubborn spirits tamed.

Yet, as forgetting all they knew,
ere forty days were passed,
With blazing Sinai still in view,
a molten calf they cast.

Yes, Aaron, God's anointed priest,
who on the Mount had been,
He dared prepare the idol beast
and lead them on to sin.

Lord, what is man, and what are we,
to recompense Thee thus?
In their offence our own we see;
their story points at us.

From Sinai we did hear Thee speak,
and from Mount Calvary too;
And yet to idols oft we seek,
while Thou art in our view.

Some golden path, or golden dream,
some fancied creature-good,
Presumes to share the heart with Him
who brought the whole with blood.

Lord, save us from our golden calves,
our sin with grief we own;
We would no more be Thine by halves,
but live to Thee alone.

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