

The Young People's Magazine

Vol 68

March 2003

No 3

Why All This Violence?

It was at the end of a week when violent crime was highlighted again and again on the front pages of Britain's newspapers. In its opinion column *The Herald*, published in Glasgow, listed the more serious incidents. They included: two teenage girls killed in a hail of bullets on a Birmingham street at night, the discovery of the remains of two murdered women in bin bags in London, and a knife fight which left a young man fighting for his life in a Glasgow hospital. *The Herald* went on to quote some figures: violent crime in Strathclyde, which includes Glasgow, in the first six months of 2002 was 15% higher than in the same months of 2001; serious assaults in Edinburgh rose by 22% and attempted murder by 125% in the same period; gun offences in England and Wales increased by 42% between 1997 and 2000-2001. Yes, some other figures told a rather different story, but it all comes together to form a very worrying picture.

The paper goes on to declare that those whose individual crimes are lumped together in these figures "are people who simply do not care". It points out that many of them, while having much of the good *things* of life have suffered from, among other things, bullying and their parents' divorce. "They are selfish because nobody has taught them not to be selfish", *The Herald* emphasises "They have no manners, no courtesy . . . they have no feelings for the people they attack. Surrounded every day by life questions they cannot understand, let alone answer, they seek violence as a solution." And it goes on: "It is useless to rely on . . . over-stretched police forces, or overcrowded prisons, when they merely tackle the symptoms, not the cause". So what is the cause? "Poverty of soul". But here the column ends except for one final sentence: "It is an issue we cannot duck".

There is nothing here we can disagree with – perhaps nothing in the whole article would provoke serious objections. But it provides no real solution for the poverty of soul it so clearly identifies. We need to look further than the provision of jobs, community action and parenting classes – useful though these may be – for a really effective solution. This poverty is so deep that no one can recover without outside help – indeed more than human help.

Without the slightest doubt, such crimes of violence show clearly the spiritual poverty of those who commit them.

By no means everyone who suffers from poverty of soul resorts to violence when relations with other people break down. Young males reaching for a gun under the smallest provocation is not the only sign of spiritual poverty. It shows itself in many other ways. Why is God so often ignored? Why do so many husbands desert their wives, and why do so many wives desert their husbands? Why do so many men and women live together as man and wife, although they have not taken the vows to each other – in marriage – which would give them the right to live as man and wife? And why is the Sabbath neglected as a day for the worship of God? This is all part of the wider picture of poverty of soul. Indeed there is desperate poverty in every soul that is looking for satisfaction in the things of this world, trying to live without any thought of God and His commandments.

But we must ask ourselves: What is the reason for poverty of soul? It is all the result of the first human sin, in the Garden of Eden. Mankind – not just Adam, but all his descendants – fell into sin then. So *everyone* is born in a state of spiritual poverty – not just those who are given to violence and other forms of serious outward sin. We all begin life away from God, and every sin we commit drives us farther and farther away from Him. And there is no hope of a remedy for our spiritual poverty if we look no farther than what we can do or what other human beings can do for us.

Where then must we look for the remedy? Paul reminded believers in Corinth: “Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). What wonderful kindness is here! Christ, the Lord of glory, possessing infinite riches, became man. As man He became unbelievably poor. He went about doing good but did not have “where to lay His head”. Yet He became poorer still; even His clothes were taken away at the cross. There He suffered fearful agony so that sinners could be reconciled to God, so that those who are spiritually poor might have a right to all spiritual riches when they believe in Him.

Think of the thief on the cross. He was a criminal; perhaps he had committed violence. Certainly this is obvious: he suffered from poverty of soul; he had nothing that he could carry with him into eternity. But Christ Jesus had come to the cross to save sinners like him – sinners who had absolutely nothing to recommend them to God. And now that Christ has risen from the grave and ascended to heaven, He gives to all who believe in Him great riches – all that they really need in this world and complete blessedness in heaven. Indeed, even on the cross Christ was able to give

these riches to the thief beside Him, just as He had given these riches to many in Old Testament times who were spiritually poor, including some as violent as Manasseh, the wicked King of Judah.

When the thief looked to Jesus for salvation, he at once he lost his poverty of soul; at once he was made spiritually rich. That very day he was admitted to heaven, where he is still enjoying complete, never-ending happiness. It is the same remedy that today's violent criminals need – indeed all who suffer from spiritual poverty. Other remedies may give a little help – but their benefit cannot extend beyond death. How much the gospel needs to be proclaimed everywhere today with real conviction that it is true! But how much damage is done when ministers refuse to proclaim a pure gospel as the one effective remedy for spiritual poverty!

Daniel Baker was a well-known minister in America who died in 1857. One day, a man without any religion – and therefore someone who clearly was spiritually poor – came with some friends to the door of the church where Baker was taking the service. At that moment Baker was engaged in prayer. After listening for only a few minutes, the man whispered to his friends, “That man prays as if he was really talking with God”. He recognised that there was something real in the minister's religion. And, the more he listened, the more the man was convinced that this was so. He had come to mock; instead, it is said, he remained to pray and was converted. He found the remedy for poverty of soul.

But this remedy is despised everywhere. How much might be done to give children a stable family background if the Government would promote marriage as the setting which God has appointed in which a man and a woman may live together honourably! Even when the Government has no real solution for violent crime, it will do nothing to promote true religion – although that is its duty before God. Instead, we are told that other, false religions must be respected.

The Herald made a good job of highlighting the problem of violence in Britain today and focusing on the poverty of soul that lies behind it. But it had no real solution to offer. Effectively it ducks the issue. Yet, as we have seen, there is a solution. God has revealed it in the Bible, where the most vital of life questions are answered. And when sinners really believe the gospel, they turn their backs on violence; they develop a degree of respect for the feelings of others; they begin to live godly lives. How sad that the Government and the media and almost everyone else are ignoring the gospel message, where Christ is proclaimed as the Saviour of sinners! There is no other solution for poverty of soul. Let none of us shut our ears to this message or we will have to endure that poverty throughout eternity.

“The Lord Was with Joseph”

2. A Good and Godly Upbringing

Rev N M Ross

This paper was given at the 2000 Youth Conference. Last month's instalment pointed out various kinds of lessons that may be learned from the life of Joseph. We now begin to look at lessons on living the Christian life.

As we noted last month, Joseph was an exceptionally godly person. The Bible gives no information about the time of his conversion but it is obvious that he was a pious youth when he was taken to Egypt. It is likely that Joseph, like David in the Old Testament and Timothy in the New, began to walk in the path of righteousness while he was young.

Although Joseph was godly from an early age, I am sure he did not think that he began such a life too early. It was said of Robert Murray M'Cheyne that, although he was converted as a young man, he mourned over the years he had spent loving the world and living for it. You must never think that it is better to wait until later in life before giving proper attention to your need to repent, believe the gospel and live a godly life. It is never too early to begin the Christian life. Some people foolishly think that anyone who becomes a committed Christian at an early age is too good for this world, and others think that he or she is then of no good to this world. How wrong they all are! And it is certain that you would be making a grave mistake if you were to distance yourself from true religion with a view to advancing your career and being successful in the world. In fact, it was because Joseph lived near to God and nailed his colours to the mast, that he was promoted to high positions and prospered so much. “When a man's ways please the Lord, He maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him” (Proverbs 16:7).

Joseph began to live a godly life because the Holy Spirit worked a saving change in his heart, but he had the great privilege of being brought up in the heart of the Church of that time (which, as we noted, was made up of Jacob's large extended family). He had the priceless privilege of being *taught the truth of God in his own home*. Not only did he have godly Jacob and Rachel as his parents – who would have given him both good instruction and a good example – but he also had holy Isaac as his grandfather. Before he was forcibly separated from his family at the age of 17, Joseph would have been often in the company of Isaac, who was then about 168. No doubt Joseph heard many wonderful things from Isaac about his great-grandfather Abraham – how he went to Mount Moriah, for example, to offer up Isaac himself as a sacrifice. Joseph would also have listened with the deepest interest and awe when his father Jacob told how he was given a vision at Bethel of the

ladder between heaven and earth and how, years later, he wrestled with the angel of the Lord at Mahanaim and not only obtained a blessing but was also given a new name, Israel.

Some children who have godly parents or grandparents are ashamed of their godliness and embarrassed by it. Such an attitude is dishonouring to their parents and is a sin against the Fifth Commandment. Let us learn to be really appreciative if we have godly parents and other relatives who teach us the truth about God and show us how we should live to the glory of God.

Another important factor in Joseph’s life was that *his father favoured him more than all his other sons*. Jacob no doubt regarded Joseph as the son of his beloved Rachel, but also the son of his old age (Jacob was 91 when Joseph was born). It would seem too that the gracious, amiable character of Joseph would have further strengthened the special bond between father and son. Jacob possibly regarded Joseph as equivalent to the first-born in his whole family, for he was the first-born son of the woman whom Jacob first chose to be his wife. He did not hide his favouritism, for he gave Joseph a costly coat of many colours – a custom in Eastern lands showing that a special honour was conferred. For Joseph it was also a source of trouble. We read in Genesis 37:4, “When his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him”. But the real reason for their hatred was Joseph’s evident godliness. We can be sure that, if we live as Christians, we will meet with envy and opposition from ungodly people, perhaps even in our own family – a point we shall look at more closely later.

We note next that Joseph *honoured his parents*. He obeyed his father when, for example, Jacob told him to go Shechem to see how his brothers were getting on. Genesis 37:13 says, “Israel said unto Joseph, Do not thy brethren feed the flock in Shechem? Come, and I will send thee unto them. And he said to him, Here am I.” Shechem was about 40 miles north of Hebron, where Jacob then lived, but Joseph did not complain about the long distance he had to walk, or about having to go where he might be in danger because of the evil which his brothers Simeon and Levi had done previously to the Shechemites. The lesson is clear: we must be obedient to our parents (and to others who have lawful authority over us) and our obedience should be willing and cheerful. Paul directs us: “Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord” (Colossians 3:20).

Joseph’s loving respect for his aged father was probably a factor in *reporting to him the wicked conduct of his brothers*. Genesis 37:2 informs us: “Joseph, being seventeen years old, was feeding the flock with his brethren; and the lad was with the sons of Bilhah, and with the sons of Zilpah,

his father's wives: and Joseph brought unto his father their evil report". Some writers regard Joseph's report as a mean betrayal, and say that he was a busybody and a tell-tale in informing his father, but that is to misjudge him completely. George Lawson is correct, I believe, when he comments that Joseph "took no pleasure in doing so". Joseph saw something his brothers were not seeing or were ignoring: that their wickedness was not only sin against God, but it also brought dishonour on the cause of God. Therefore Joseph did what was right: he talked to his father about their evil conduct so that, if possible, it would be stopped and his brothers reformed.

We are not, of course, to be idle gossips or hurtful tell-tales. However, in the providence of God, we may discover others doing wrong and it may be our duty to try to remedy the situation for the benefit both of the offenders and of those harmed by them. In such a situation we need grace from God to act wisely, lest we do more harm than good.

I believe it is clear from Joseph's reaction to the evil doings of his brothers that he regarded sin, whether in himself or others, as most offensive to God. May we always have such an attitude to sin!

The Book of Ruth

60. When Does God Answer Prayer?

Rev Keith M Watkins

Ruth 3:11. "And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman."

Ruth had asked Boaz to marry her. But was he willing? Yes, he was! He said, "And now, my daughter, fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest". Yes, Boaz would marry her. Then he told her why. It was because of her excellent reputation: "For all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman". Everyone in Bethlehem knew that Ruth was upright and godly. Therefore Boaz could grant her request.

Boaz was a godly man. He was a witness on the side of the Lord. He had a testimony for holiness to maintain. If Ruth had earned a bad reputation in Bethlehem, Boaz would have found it impossible to grant her request. He could not marry a woman wallowing in sin. A godly man could not associate himself with evil. But Ruth was living a life of godliness. Everyone could see that. Therefore Boaz was free to marry her. Because Ruth was virtuous, it would not reflect badly on his witness to the holy God whom he loved and served. Because she was godly, he could marry Ruth without bringing any reproach on the Lord.

Now, just as Ruth asked Boaz to do a great thing for her, we pray to God seeking that He would do great things for us. Sometimes we wonder why He does not answer. His Word promises so much: “Ask, and it shall be given you. . . . If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him?” (Matthew 7:9,11). Yet, when we pray, we find so often that God does not answer. Why?

Perhaps it is because we are asking for what will satisfy our sinful desires: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts” (James 4:3). God will not answer sinful prayers like these.

Or perhaps our sinful lives have made it almost impossible for God to answer our prayers. When we are living in sin and are determined to go on like that, it is as if God *cannot* answer our prayers. What? Are there things that God cannot do? Yes! He “cannot lie” (Titus 1:2). He “cannot deny Himself” (2 Timothy 2:13). He “cannot be tempted with evil” (James 1:13). It is impossible for God to do these things because they are contrary to His holy nature. Can an honest man tell a lie? Not if he is going to remain an honest man! In a much higher way, God cannot do anything that would be against His holiness.

If God answered our prayers when we are determined to go on in our sins, it would seem as if He treated sin lightly. It would even look as if He approved of sin. Just as Boaz could not have granted Ruth’s request if she was living a sinful life, so we cannot expect God to answer our prayers if we are sunk in iniquity and happy to remain so. Our sin is an obstacle preventing our prayers being answered.

In Isaiah’s time, the people of Israel were making many prayers. But God was not answering. Why? Because they would not forsake their sins. “When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide Mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood” (Isaiah 1:15). How could God answer them when their lives were full of violence and cruelty? It would then look as if God approved of their sins. Isaiah told them again: “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid His face from you, that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1,2). God did have the power: His hand was still mighty. God could hear what they asked: His ear remained open. But by continuing in sin they made it impossible for the holy Lord God to associate Himself with them. He could not answer their prayers when everyone could see that they were still set on a life of sin.

The psalmist knew this when he wrote, “If I regard iniquity in my heart,

the Lord will not hear me” (Psalm 66:18). If he was delighting in sin and determined to go on in sin, his prayers would not be answered. If they were, that would lead him to think that God was pleased with him in spite of his sin. It would make him think that God did not care about his sin. God could never allow such a thing! Instead, the psalmist had to forsake his wickedness, with heartfelt confession, faith and repentance. Then the Lord could answer.

Are you now thinking that your prayers will never be answered? You find your love of a life of sin so strong. You know that you are far from virtuous. And you fear that everyone else knows that too. So how can God ever answer your prayers? You are ready to despair. But we say to you, Don't give up hope! When the sinner first comes to God, he is nothing but sin. Like the publican, he can only pray, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). But that prayer can have the seed of repentance in it. God can answer that prayer! He *has* answered that prayer many times!

There was once a very wicked woman in a city in Israel. Everyone knew what kind of life she had lived. But one day the Saviour let this woman wash His feet with her tears and wipe them with her hair. A Pharisee was watching. He thought that Christ was associating with evil. “This man,” the Pharisee declared, “if He were a prophet, would have known who and what manner of woman this is that toucheth Him: for she is a sinner” (Luke 7:39). But Christ knew that this woman was changed. She had found forgiveness. She had left her life of sin. Christ would not hold the past against her. By grace she had become a virtuous woman, and even though all the city did not know it yet, Christ knew it. Therefore she was as welcome to Him as anyone. Christ could accept her because soon all the city would see the evidence of her repentance.

So there is hope for us. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). But let us not forget: if we are determined to go on in wickedness, we cannot hope that God will answer our prayers.

Because of her virtuous life, Ruth could present her request to Boaz with confidence. It is wonderful when believers pray to the Lord like that. “Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. And whatsoever we ask, we receive of Him, because we keep His commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:21,22). God's people do have a sense of sin. In fact, they are more conscious of personal sinfulness than anyone. But they grieve over their sins and hate them and seek grace to leave them. By faith they look to Christ to cleanse away all sin. It is not that they keep God's commands perfectly. But their sincere desire is to please the Lord in all that they do, and this is what they try to do every

day. They look to Christ alone for their righteousness before God; only in Christ can they hope that God will accept them. When they are accepted in this way, there are no obstacles to their prayers being answered. It is as if God says to them: “Fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for – in Christ – thou art virtuous”. Whatever they ask in prayer, they receive from Him, just as Ruth obtained the answer she desired from Boaz.

Ann Judson

8. “In Heaven We Praise Him”

Adoniram and Ann Judson were American missionaries who came to Burma in 1813. After some years, a few Burmese were converted. When war broke out between Britain and Burma, Adoniram was suspected of being a spy. Ann did all she could to have him released and to have his conditions made easier. He was eventually set free, but she too had suffered – from bouts of serious illness.

On 21 March 1826, the Judsons were back in Rangoon. It was more than two years since they had left for Ava. They had gone there under a sense of duty, in the hope that they would be used to bring sinners into Christ’s kingdom. Ann wrote to her brother and sister: “Pray for us that these heavy afflictions [of imprisonment, illness and disappointment] may not be in vain, but may be blessed to our spiritual good and the advancement of Christ’s Church among the heathen”. In Rangoon they found their house in ruins, and the members of the church had scattered.

The Judsons were anxious to begin their missionary work again. Rangoon was near those parts of Burma which had been taken over by the British. Ann and her husband planned to move to a new town called Amherst, where they would have full freedom to spread the gospel. Four Christian families had already gone to live there. The Judsons were extremely hopeful as they thought of the prospects before them. They were anxious now to give their whole time to instructing the heathen. They were glad that they would no longer have to plead with the Burmese king for permission of to go on with their work. Nor would they have to spend time persuading government ministers to stop the persecution of their converts. Ann hoped that their favourite motto: “On earth we serve God; in heaven we praise Him”, would always stimulate them to exert themselves in their work.

Soon after they reached Amherst, Adoniram was called away to help negotiate another treaty with Burma. It was not the sort of work that he wished to be involved in, but the British commissioner held out the hope that one of the results of the treaty might be religious freedom throughout the

country. He left Amherst at the beginning of July 1826 but, soon after reaching Ava, it became clear that the Burmese would not allow religious freedom in the part of the country which they controlled. The negotiations dragged on, and Adoniram felt that the whole business was a waste of his precious time. Then on November 24 a messenger brought a letter stamped with a black seal and expressed sympathy to Adoniram over the death of his child. In fact Maria was still alive, though she survived for only six more months. Adoniram opened the letter and discovered the truth: "Mrs Judson is no more". Ann had died exactly a month before then. She was only 37. She had gone to join the saints of God praising Him in heaven for ever.

Ann could do no more to bring the gospel to the people of Burma. But she had done what she could. The work had scarcely begun when she died; only a small number had heard about the way of salvation – and of that small number very few had believed in Christ. Yet we can be sure that God orders everything wisely. He makes no mistakes.

Ann's death was probably the result of the terrible illnesses she suffered as she followed her husband trying to protect him during his imprisonment, but it was due to her that Adoniram was spared to continue his missionary work in Burma for many more years. Were it not for Ann's unwearied efforts to help him, it is most unlikely that he would have survived his prolonged period of imprisonment. Perhaps Adoniram Judson's greatest achievement was his translation of the entire Bible, which he completed in 1834. He then spent several more years revising it thoroughly, and it was published in 1840.

Before ever she left home for Burma, Ann had written: "I am a creature of God, and He has an undoubted right to do with me as seems good in His sight". God exercised that right, but she never regretted the decision to become a missionary. As death approached, she was unafraid except for her fear that "I shall not be able to bear these pains". Even then she was content with God's will. And we can believe that God was faithful to His promise and that He supported her in all her sufferings in these last lonely days of her life.

On New Year's Day 1811, some time before they married, Adoniram had written to her: "As every moment of the year will bring you nearer the end of your pilgrimage, may it bring you nearer to God and find you more prepared to hail the messenger of death as a deliverer and a friend". It is likely that Adoniram's wish was fulfilled during 1811, and during many other years after that. But although we know very little about her last days, it seems that Ann, by the grace of God, was indeed able to welcome death as a deliverer from the troubles and the sin of this world, a friend to bring her into heaven – nearer to God than she could ever be in this world.

Adoniram lived on in the hope that, at the resurrection, he and Ann, and

their other relations who had already died, “though all unworthy, shall be rescued from the power of death and the grave. And when the crown of life is set on our heads, and when we know assuredly that we shall die no more, we shall make heaven’s arches ring with songs of praise to Him who hath loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.”

The need to spread the gospel throughout the world is just as great today as it was in the Judson’s time. What need there is for prayer to God that He would send out great numbers of faithful men to preach the gospel everywhere, and that He would send with them godly women like Ann Judson who would support them in every way possible!

Note: The information for these articles has been taken from Sharon James’ excellent book: *My Heart in His Hands, Ann Judson of Burma*, published by Evangelical Press and available from the Free Presbyterian Bookroom at £6.95.

Delayed by a Dolphin

Rev N M Ross

Georges – yes “Georges” is his name – is a dolphin which lives off the coast of Dorset in England. Tourists stop to watch him gracefully leaping in the sea, and children love to swim with him as he plays.

One day he was seen playing right in front of the ferry moored at Studland slipway on the Isle of Purbeck, ready to make the ten-minute crossing to Sandbanks. So, says a recent newspaper report, the skipper had to delay the departure of the ferry for fear of sailing into Georges – and that is why some thieves were caught! But how?

The story is that three men stole £2000 worth of gold rings from a jeweller’s shop in Swanage, not far from Studland, then made their getaway in a car. They caught the ferry at Studland just as it was about to sail. In a minute or so they would make good their escape! Meantime, the police arrived at the scene of the crime in Swanage. They thought it was now too late to catch the men at either Studland or Sandbanks. They gave chase anyway, and also phoned their colleagues to try to intercept the suspects on the other side.

When the police got to Studland they saw, to their great surprise, that the ferry was still at the slipway. It was waiting, of course, for Georges to move out of its intended path. The police immediately boarded the ferry to arrest the men. There they were, standing on the top deck with other passengers watching the dolphin, and with their backs to the policemen. Imagine the shock they got when the police appeared at their elbows!

We see how God, in His providence, used a fish to stop those thieves

making their escape. God works all things according to the counsel of His will, including the actions of His creatures in the sea, on land and in the air.

Sometimes God uses His creatures to *help godly people* in an extraordinary way. He used a fish to save Jonah from drowning and to bring him back to dry land – even although it was a very frightening experience for Jonah.

God also used a fish to provide money to pay taxes to the Roman government. Remember how Jesus told Peter, “Go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: that take, and give unto them for Me and thee” (Matthew 17:27). We cannot say how the coin came to be in the fish’s mouth, but we do know that God worked in His providence to make provision for the Saviour and His disciples at that moment.

How good it was for Elijah that God sent ravens to feed him when he was in hiding near the brook called Cherith. God said to him, “I have commanded the ravens to feed thee there” (1 Kings 17:5). Then we read in the next verse “And the ravens brought him bread and flesh in the morning, and bread and flesh in the evening; and he drank of the brook”.

Some of you may have read about John MacIntosh, a godly man in the Highlands long ago; he was a catechist in Lairg. His wife told him that they had no food in the house, except some potatoes and oatmeal, for the visitors who were soon to arrive for the communion season. John went out to pray about the matter at the side of the river near his house. As he was praying, a salmon leaped out of the water. It did not splash back into the water; it landed on the grassy bank right beside John! He took it up and presented it to his wife, telling her to use it for their guests.

Sometimes God uses His creatures *against wicked people*. Wicked Pharaoh experienced this when God sent a plague of frogs which covered the land of Egypt; then a plague of lice “throughout all the land” on man and beast; then swarms of flies which covered the ground, covered the people and filled all their homes. God also sent a plague of locusts which ate every green thing in the land. Each of those creatures was very small, but how great was the damage, discomfort and distress they caused.

You may remember also how wicked Balaam’s ass spoke to him. “The Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam, What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times? . . . Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden ever since I was thine unto this day? Was I ever wont to do so unto thee?” (Numbers 22:28-30). So, as we read in 2 Peter 2:15, Balaam “was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man’s voice forbad the madness of the prophet”.

Are you godly or wicked – I mean, are you converted or unconverted, a

believer or an unbeliever? If you are one of the godly, God is for you and not against you, and He will make even His creatures to be on your side. On the other hand, if you are still among the wicked and ungodly, God can make even His smallest creatures to be against you. How important it is to be one of God's children by the new birth and by faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

For Junior Readers

Putting God First

Have you ever noticed how Paul describes the sins of the Gentiles – the heathen – in Romans chapter 1? He says they “worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator” (verse 25). The Creator, as you know, is God. So these people were worshipping and serving created things more than God – or perhaps even instead of God. What does Paul mean? He means that they were idolaters, doesn't he? He means that they were breaking the very first commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me”.

What about you? I am sure you have never thought you were guilty of idolatry. You don't have any idols in your home. You don't bow down to any graven images. And that is good. But you may break the First Commandment in other ways.

You can worship and serve the creature by giving someone else or something else the first place in your thoughts and your desires, instead of God. If you were to ask most children at your school, or in the world around you, who they admired most, they might mention a famous sportsman or pop star. They probably have posters of footballers or singers around their bedroom walls. What does that tell you? Surely, that they have a high place in their hearts for these people. Well, if they are putting these so-called stars first in their hearts instead of God, they are guilty of idolatry. They are worshipping and serving the creature more than the Creator, even although they may not realise it.

There are also other ways of worshipping and serving the creature. Some of them are less obvious, and perhaps you have never thought of them as breaking this First Commandment.

If we trust in anything more than God, we are making a god of it. Perhaps you are trusting in being brought up in a Christian home, or in behaving well, or in going to church, or in knowing the Bible well. It is good to do all these things but they cannot save you. If you trust in them, you are putting them above God. And that is idolatry.

If we love anything more than God, we are making a god of it. Many young people seem to love their pleasures most of all. Life for them is to enjoy themselves. They are “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God”. This is also idolatry.

Even to love our families, which is absolutely right, can become idolatry. If we think more of them than we do of God, or delight more in them than in God, it is idolatry. If you are afraid to offend them more than you are afraid of sinning against God, that too is idolatry.

Because the Lord had saved Paul from his sins, he belonged to God. So, when he spoke about God, he once said, “Whose I am and whom I serve”. That was almost a motto for his life. His words and actions showed that he served God and worshipped Him. Do your life and behaviour show this? Will you not ask God to help you to obey this Commandment: “Thou shalt have no other gods before Me” – not only in your life but also in your heart. Then it will be obvious to all who know you that you put God first.

J van Kralingen

For Younger Readers

Beautiful Flowers

Do you have flowers in your garden? Red, blue, yellow or white flowers? Or some other colour? Some flowers are big; some are small. Some are tall; some hardly rise above the ground.

Flowers are lovely things. Why is that? They are lovely because God made them. God made everything.

And God made us in such a way that we can enjoy beautiful things. When we see beautiful flowers in a garden, we should stop and say, They are beautiful; and they are beautiful because God made them. It wasn't because some clever man decided that it would be nice to have pretty flowers in his garden.

But you can see beautiful flowers in other places, where no one has planted them. Sometimes you see wild flowers growing beside the road, or in a field. Perhaps you are out for a walk. Your mother points to the flowers. She says, “How beautiful!” And what should you think? You should say to yourself, They are beautiful because God made them.

God has made beautiful things because He Himself is beautiful. No, we cannot see Him, no matter where we look. But He has told

us about Himself in the Bible. He has told us that He is perfectly holy; He never does anything wrong. He always does what is right.

Here is a verse from Psalm 104 for you to learn:

The glory of the mighty Lord
continue shall for ever:
The Lord Jehovah shall rejoice
in all his works together.

Everything that God does is wonderful. We should praise Him because of all the beautiful things He does. What is the most wonderful thing He could do for you? Can you think?

It would be to take away your sin. Then you would begin to love God. Your soul would begin to look beautiful. Until God takes away your sin, He sees nothing but ugliness in your soul.

No one can go to heaven unless God has made them holy. You must ask God to take away your sin and to make you beautiful. Surely you do not want Him always to see that you are ugly. Surely you do not want Him to have to keep you out of heaven.

“I Wasn’t Praying”

Rev David Campbell

One Wednesday last July, nine miners in Pennsylvania were trapped a mile and a half underground in a flooded coal mine. Their plight must have filled them with alarm and, as they thought of the possibility of never seeing their families again, they must have been torn by sorrow. For 77 hours, more than three days, they were trapped below the surface as rescuers tried to bore a hole down to them so that they could bring them out in a narrow rescue capsule.

The first attempt failed when the drill bit broke half-way down, and this seriously delayed the rescue effort. Time was running out, but with the help of Global Positioning Systems technology – using a satellite – an air hole was made and contact with the miners established. An error of even a few feet either way and the rescuers might have missed the men entirely. This would almost certainly have meant death to all nine of the miners. The rescue effort went exactly to plan and, to all who witnessed it, it was a most remarkable deliverance. A local road sign expressed wonder and thankfulness: “God gave us a miracle”. Certainly the goodness of God was to be seen in

the success of the rescue and it is only right that it should be recognised.

The men's accounts of what took place in the flooded mine reveal the horror and fear they experienced when facing what seemed certain death. It is sad to read many of their stories because of how the men took the name of God in vain and used unsuitable language to express their sense of danger. However, in their fear some of them thought of God and of meeting Him. Perhaps they never had serious thoughts of God before, but the prospect of dying forced the realities of eternity and judgement upon their minds. This is very often the case when people are in danger, because God has left in our souls a sense of His being and we cannot get rid of it completely.

It is not strange that the miners prayed to God in their trouble. In Psalm 50, God encourages us to do this: "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me". Yet one of these men, trapped for some time behind the fast flowing water filling the mine, was very confused about what prayer is. He says, "There was nowhere I could go. The water in front of me – it's like the raging Colorado River. Just gushing. I can't breathe. I'm getting no oxygen. So I'm gasping. So I'm thinking, You got to calm down. I kept saying, 'Please, God. Please, God. Please, God.' I can't think of a prayer. I'm not praying, I'm just saying, 'Please, God, help me'."

The miner said he wasn't praying. But he used one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible: "Lord, help me" (Matthew 15:25). Of course, without faith and the spirit of prayer, the words themselves are ineffective, but this prayer is better than many long, accurate prayers offered up by those who are not in trouble. We do not know if the miner believed the gospel or if he even knew that he was a sinner in need of salvation, but his was a suitable prayer for a soul in need.

There are many differences between the prayers of the Pharisee and the Publican (see Luke 18). One was long; the other was short. One was well rehearsed; the other was spontaneous. One was from a self-righteous principle, the other was from someone who knew he was unworthy. One was man-glorifying; the other was God-glorifying. But the most important difference was that one was answered and the other was not. It was the simple, short, humble prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner", that received the great blessing: "this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other".

Short prayers are often the best prayers. May we all, like the poor publican, learn them and use them. David found help when he was in great trouble; he said, "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and delivered him out of all his troubles." (Psalm 34:6). We also read how "Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him" (1 Samuel 7:9). God still hears prayer.

Looking Around Us

Plausible Theories

What causes hiccups? It is a question that has always baffled scientists. For one thing, hiccups do not seem to have any useful purpose. But now some researchers in France have come up with the idea that they are a left-over from an early stage of evolution, 370 million years ago. Hiccups are sudden contractions of the muscles used for breathing in. After the muscles start to move, the windpipe is shut off producing the “hic” sound.

The researchers assume that man’s early ancestors were like tadpoles living in water and had gills to help them breathe. Some such creatures today push water across their gills by squeezing their mouth cavity, while their windpipe is shut off to stop water getting into their lungs.

It is amazing that anyone should take this theory seriously. *New Scientist* magazine, for instance, has carried the report although there is no evidence to justify it. No wonder that Allan Pack, an expert in animal breathing at the University of Pennsylvania, admitted that “it’s going to be very tough to prove”, although he did claim that it was “a plausible theory”.

In fact, those who promote evolution thrive on plausible theories. The last issue of *Creation* magazine reported on theories about the planet Neptune. About 30 times as far away from the sun as the Earth, evolutionists expected it to be tremendously cold. But when the Voyager II spacecraft flew past the planet in 1989, many measurements were taken which showed that Neptune *generates* heat. This did not fit in with evolutionary ideas but, as the magazine points out, it is perfectly reasonable to believe that the planet is still cooling down, as it was created by God only some thousands of years ago.

One “plausible theory” is that Uranus and Neptune came into existence much closer to the sun and moved outwards – *against* the sun’s gravitational pull – to near the edge of the solar system. One of the scientists who made this suggestion admitted: “So far it’s been very difficult for anybody to come up with a scenario that actually produces Uranus and Neptune”. *Creation* comments: “The ultimate goal of the evolutionists is to ‘come up with a scenario’ of how the universe formed by itself, without a Creator. Sadly, they often seem to believe that the mere act of making up such a story proves that it all actually happened that way. It doesn’t even need to be a good story.”

Such is the foolishness of unbelief. But at the beginning of the Bible, God tells us that the whole universe was created in six days. This is no plausible theory; it is the truth. Let us believe it. Then we have no need to be disturbed by what the Apostle Peter describes as “cunningly devised fables”.

Youth Conference 2003

Arrangements

Venue: Inverness Millburn Youth Hostel, Victoria Drive, Inverness.

Dates: Tuesday, April 8, at 1 pm, to Thursday, April 10, at 1 pm.

Chairman: Rev D A Ross.

Lower Age Limit: 16 years old or fourth year secondary.

Applications: To Rev D A Ross, F P Manse, Laide, Ross-shire, IV22 2NB, *as soon as possible* (the closing date is March 31). See the February issue for an application form. The fee will be £36 for applicants in full-time employment and £18 for others. Cheques are payable to the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

Programme

Tuesday, April 8

2.30 pm

“In the Beginning”

What the Bible Teaches About Creation

by Rev David Campbell

7.00 pm

“All Have Sinned”

What the Bible Teaches About the Fall and its Effects

by Rev A Smith

Wednesday, April 9

9.30 am

The Apostle of the North

The Life of John Macdonald, Ferintosh

by Rev D W B Somerset

1.30 pm

The Religious Past of the Black Isle

A Historical Tour, conducted by

by Rev D W B Somerset

7.30 pm

Prayer Meeting

in Inverness Free Presbyterian Church

Thursday, April 10

9.30 am

Mary the Mother of Our Lord

Some Practical Lessons

by Rev J R Tallach

Further information will be sent to each applicant about a week before the conference. If you have any queries, do not hesitate to phone Mr Ross (Tel: 01445 731340). But please do *not* delay sending in your application.