

The Young People's Magazine

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Total Mastery Over Nature?

This is an age when knowledge has increased beyond the imagination of anyone who lived even a few hundred years ago. And science has vastly increased human understanding of all of God's creation – from the tiny particles that make up each atom of matter to the vast galaxies that cover the sky. And as scientific knowledge has increased, so technology has allowed man to control the world around him to an extent that no one in the past could possibly have expected.

Man is naturally proud, and the increase in knowledge and the advances in technology have greatly stimulated his pride. A prominent professor once claimed that "science offers us a total mastery over our environment and our destiny". He may have been looking far into the future; he may have admitted that we are still a long way from this state of total mastery. But he was sure that man will yet achieve this total mastery over nature.

But he was wrong. Suppose that man could conquer disease and death. Suppose that man could achieve total mastery over his destiny, so that everyone could live endlessly. Then, after just a few generations, the world would become hopelessly overcrowded; we would need an impossibly huge increase in the supply of water, food and many other things. But it should be clear that man will never reach total mastery over his environment and his destiny.

Because of human pride, God is forgotten. Or, to put it more accurately, people *try* to forget Him; they are much more comfortable with ideas which allow them to assume that there is no God. In Bible times, people did not have such sophisticated theories as are fashionable today, yet there were those who wanted to live as if God did not exist. Was it because of some superior wisdom that they thought like this? No, they are described as fools, not as wise: "The *fool* hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14:1). Such individuals have said this in their hearts; it is what they want to believe; it is how they want to live their lives. But they are not really convinced that there is no God. And it is altogether foolish to think He does not exist. However clever, however wise, they may be in other things, this shows a basic foolishness in their whole way of looking at life. Yet in the end, nothing can

be more important than to know God as He really is – as He has revealed Himself in the Scriptures.

In every generation, including this one at the beginning of the twenty-first century, God reminds man that he does not have total mastery over nature. Accidents happen, and people's lives are seriously interrupted; the whole pattern of their lives may be changed for ever. Disasters happen, and vast numbers of people – sometimes whole communities – are swept away into eternity. Yes, there are reasons, whether we can understand them or not. And yes, science may offer us a clear explanation of what took place. But we must never forget that God is in control of everything that happens.

With the help of modern scientific knowledge, one can readily give some explanation of the tsunami at the end of December, which caused so many deaths – 280 000 at the most recent estimate. We can point to a massive earthquake under the sea, which in turn was caused by a build-up of pressure as the result of the movement of vast plates which extend from under the continents to under the Indian Ocean. But we must never imagine that any of these movements take place outside God's control.

People wonder why disasters happen, and especially why bad things happen to good people. But someone has suggested that a more sensible question is: Why do good things happen to bad people. We certainly have an answer to this last question in the Bible, which is where we ought to look for an answer to all such questions. Christ Himself tells us that God "maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

And the Bible answers the other questions also. We live in a sinful world. We are all sinners. We do not deserve any of God's good gifts. Most people today think that they have a right to expect everything to work out just as it suits them. And yet they ignore God; they never pray to Him; they never ask Him to make all things work together for their good. So, if they refuse to acknowledge the authority of God over them – and over everything in the world – they should not be surprised if unwelcome things happen to them. But it was a godly man who told the Lord: "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies . . . which Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant" (Genesis 32:10). Jacob knew he was unworthy of all the good things God gave him, but again and again he asked God for His help. And He did so because he knew that God is in control.

When disasters happen – illness, injury, the death of relations or friends, or whatever – it is good to know that God is in control. So it makes sense to pray to Him, to tell Him our difficulties and to ask Him to help us, though we must always remember that God knows better than we do. God knows

that what we ask may not be good for us, and He may say, No. But if we ask sincerely and He does not give us what we ask for, He will give us something better.

This is a world which man cannot control. We should not expect that he will ever be able to control *everything* that happens. However well organised governments may become and however far science and technology may advance, they will never be able to control all the forces of nature. And this is one matter that God is teaching the world through the tsunami disaster. Although mankind cannot control the world, God can. Nothing is too hard for Him. He will cause everything to happen just as He has purposed, to the end of time. Then He will burn up the world and everything in it.

In such a world, we must learn to become totally dependent on God. We ought to commit all our ways to Him. *We* may not be able to control nature, but God is in control of everything. Even God's children discover that many of their plans do not work out; many things do not happen in the way they want. But they have every reason to believe that God has better plans for them. They cannot see into the future; He can. They cannot understand properly how things are going to work out; He can. And He assures them that "all things work together for good to them that love God". He is in control of their whole future, and so all will be well

We ought to commit everything to God in prayer. We should recognise how great and powerful He is, and how complete is His control over everything. Those who have spent a lifetime committing their affairs to God in prayer are left with no doubt that He is "able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). So what reason we have to rely always on God for everything! Especially when the Bible tells us: "The Lord is high unto all them that call upon Him . . . in truth" (Psalm 145:18). Let us seek first – before anything else – to be reconciled to God. Let us pray that God would bring us near to Him through Jesus Christ.

In a fallen world, no generation will ever be able to get rid of the effects of sin. We must all die. We must all pass into eternity. Certainly the advance of science has been wonderful, but what could be more wonderful than God providing a blessed eternity for those who call upon Him in Christ's name? The work of salvation is the supreme demonstration that God, not man, is in control of everything. Is it not time that we stopped trying to fight against the Most High God? Is it not time that we approached Him in the name of Christ? Then we will have God's blessing throughout the rest of our lives here, and we will have a blessed eternity. Then we will commit everything around us, for the present and for the future, into God's care. Is that not far better than us having total mastery over our environment and our destiny?

The Book of Ruth

76. The Price of Redemption

Rev Keith M Watkins

Ruth 4:5,6. "Then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance. And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it."

Boaz was ready to save Naomi's land from being sold to outsiders. So was the nearer relative. "I will redeem it", were his words. But just redeeming the land was not enough. There was another problem. Naomi's husband and both her sons were dead. There was no man to inherit the land and keep alive the name of the family. Naomi was too old to have a son now, but Ruth, her widowed daughter-in-law, was still young. Therefore, whoever bought the land must also marry Ruth, "the wife of the dead". Their first son would inherit the land in the name of Ruth's deceased husband. When the nearer relative heard this, he changed his mind about the land: "I cannot redeem it for myself". It would injure his own inheritance, for he would never get the land for himself. So he told Boaz to redeem it instead.

The relative refused to continue because it was too *costly*. To buy only the land, that was all right – especially as the land would probably become his anyway once Naomi died, because she had no male heirs. But to marry Ruth and raise up children for another family, that was too costly. He was not willing to pay that much.

But Boaz was willing to pay any price to redeem. No matter how costly it was going to be, Boaz was willing to pay. After the relative's failure, how thankful Naomi and Ruth must have been for Boaz! Whatever the price, Boaz would redeem the land and Ruth also.

So it is with the Boaz of the everlasting gospel, Jesus Christ. At the greatest possible cost to Himself, He came to redeem His people. The price He paid for their redemption was high. It could not have been higher. As Psalm 49:8 says, "The redemption of their soul is precious" – or costly. Corruptible things like silver and gold could not purchase their redemption. It needed blood, even the precious, infinitely-valuable blood of Christ (see 1 Peter 1:18,19). The Lord Jesus was willing to purchase His Church, His bride, with His own blood.

The Saviour had counted the cost, and was prepared to pay the heavy price of full redemption. He was faithful to the covenant engagements He had made to His Father: "The cup which My Father hath given Me, shall I

not drink it?” (John 18:11). He was unswerving in His love to His people: “Having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end” (John 13:1).

The Son of God had engaged to be the surety of His people. A surety is someone who agrees to pay the debts of another person. The Bible advises us not to guarantee other people’s debts like that, because it can lead to our own financial ruin. “My son, if thou be surety for thy friend . . . thou art snared with the words of thy mouth . . . Do this now, my son, and deliver thyself” (Proverbs 6:1-3). Of course! If you saw the person you were standing for running up more and more debts, you would want to get out of that arrangement as fast as possible. That’s what the nearer relative did when he began to realise how much it would cost to redeem Naomi and Ruth.

But that was not what Boaz did. And that was not what the Lord Jesus did. They were willing to pay the full price of redemption. As God’s elect people ran up more and more debt to divine justice through adding sin to sin, the Saviour did not seek to escape the obligations He had taken up as their surety. It was as if He said, “What? Is there more to pay? And yet more? Let it be so. I will pay all that is required for their redemption.” Whatever the cost, He was willing to pay.

The nearer relative would not go ahead when he realised that redemption involved personal *sacrifice*. He would not sacrifice his own interests for the sake of Naomi and Ruth. If they could be benefited at the same time as himself, then he would help. But not if it meant marring his own inheritance. He was selfish, thinking of his own things. To help Naomi and Ruth would hurt him. So he would not help. To preserve their inheritance would damage his own. So he would not redeem.

But Boaz was willing to redeem, whatever personal sacrifices it would involve. However much his own inheritance would be marred, Boaz would not back out. Sacrificing his own interests, Boaz was determined to preserve the interests of Ruth and Naomi. They came first.

How wonderful that the Lord Jesus Christ put the interests of His people before His own! He was willing to redeem, even though it meant great sacrifice to Himself. “Even Christ pleased not Himself” (Romans 15:3). He did not seek His own things, but the things of others – that was the mind of Christ (see Philippians 2:4,5). Like Boaz, and unlike the nearer relative, Christ was willing to redeem even though it meant sacrifice.

Think of His rich “inheritance” as the second Person of the Godhead. He was rich with all the glory that belongs to God alone. But to redeem His people, He became poor (see 2 Corinthians 8:9). He was the sovereign Lord of all. But He “took upon Him the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7), to

give His life as the ransom price for many sinners. From all eternity He had enjoyed the constant delights of the fellowship of the Trinity, in the bosom of His Father. But to redeem His people, He became "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3), crying out, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1). To redeem sinners, "His visage was so marred more than any man" (Isaiah 52:14). No man ever suffered in this world like Christ suffered. No man ever offered the sacrifice that He did.

And why did the Saviour do all this? It was all for His people! It was for their redemption. It was because He loved them. It was love that caused Boaz to sacrifice his own inheritance for Ruth's redemption. It was love that caused the Son of God to give Himself a sacrifice for the redemption of His precious people. He loved the lives of His people so much that He gave His own life for them. He loved not His own life unto death, but gave it up for them.

I think that after Boaz had made this costly sacrifice for Naomi and Ruth, they would always have been prepared to make sacrifices for him. And should we not be willing to sacrifice anything and everything for the Lord Jesus Christ? Yes indeed. The love of Christ, in giving Himself for sinners, should draw us to serve Him, whatever the cost to ourselves.

The Power of Prayer

Hélio was a cheerful man in his sixties. He had been brought up a Roman Catholic and lived in a town in central Brazil. His wife used to follow another false religion, but by God's grace she was converted to the truth as it is in Jesus. Her children went with her to church and learnt much of what the Bible teaches. They came to understand that they were sinners and that there was nothing they could do to earn eternal life. The Spirit taught them their need of Christ and, as the Shorter Catechism puts it, they were "persuaded and enabled to embrace Jesus Christ as He is freely offered in the gospel."

In their daily prayers together, Hélio's wife and children pleaded for his soul. But there was no change in his life. He kept going to the local Roman Catholic church every day and showed no interest in the true gospel. When people greeted him, he would even reply: "I'm very well today and I praise God that I am a Catholic". Of course, this grieved his family. But they did not become discouraged. They kept praying for him earnestly, laying hold of God's promise: "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in Him; and He shall bring it to pass" (Psalm 37:5).

As the years went by, Hélió was starting to show signs of old age. He lost his cheerfulness and people started to wonder what the matter was. Every day he would leave home early to go to mass and would come back about an hour later. One morning, however, he left the house as usual and came back only a few minutes later looking very sad and disturbed. His wife asked him what the matter was and he told her: “When I got to church just now, I felt that I couldn’t go in. It isn’t right that I should go to that place. I need to find another church, and I need to talk to someone about my soul.”

His wife suggested that he talk to the minister of her church, and her husband agreed to meet him. The minister came to see Hélió, and talked to him about man’s sinfulness and the need for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. He explained that the Lord died for sinners so that they could have eternal life in glory. For the first time in his life, Hélió learned that it is impossible to obtain eternal life through one’s own good works. For many years he had been hearing the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which says that by giving to the poor, going to mass and saying the rosary every day one will inherit eternal life. The Holy Spirit convinced him of his sin and opened his heart to the great truth of the Bible: that Jesus said: “I am the way . . . No one cometh to the Father, but by Me” (John 14:6). Apparently he wept much when the gospel was explained to him. And from then on he started to attend church and to read the Bible. People who knew him noticed the change in his life. He became a keen reader of the Word and regarded it as more precious than any other book.

Meanwhile his health continued to deteriorate and, when he finally agreed to see the doctor, there was bad news. He was admitted to hospital and within weeks he passed away. Before dying he had the assurance that he would spend eternity in glory. His assurance came from the fact that he trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ’s atoning death for his salvation and in nothing else.

His family felt comforted at his death because of what had taken place in his soul. They were thankful for the mercy that God had shown to their dear husband and father. God had spared Hélió’s soul from an eternity of punishment. The merciful God of heaven had most wonderfully answered their prayers for his soul.

What encouragement there is for believers in this story! Sometimes we get discouraged when praying for loved ones. But in Psalm 81:10 we have this promise: “Open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it”. The Lord promises something very precious here. We are to open our mouths wide and plead for the souls of loved ones, and then open our mouths wider and plead for the souls of our neighbours, of our acquaintances and colleagues, our towns, our country and the whole world. May we pray, “Thy kingdom come”,

with unwavering faith, truly believing in our hearts that God will hear our prayers. The Lord Jesus has all power in heaven and earth to save sinners: "Who is this . . . that is glorious in His apparel, travelling in the greatness of His strength? I that speak in righteousness, mighty to save" (Isaiah 63:1).

C Johnson

For Younger Readers

Obeying the Warning

The notice warned people not to go closer to the edge. We were standing opposite the Victoria Falls in Africa. The huge Zambezi River comes to the edge of the cliffs and then all the water tumbles far down into the gorge below. At some places the spray is thrown high up into the air. It is an amazing sight, as you can see in the picture on the front cover.

But it is dangerous to go too close to the edge. If you do, you too could fall far down into the gorge below, and you would be swept away by the water. That is why the notice tells visitors not to go farther. It warns that the stones are slippery. You don't want to slip when there is so very far to fall.

But people were paying no attention to the notice. They went nearer to the edge than they were supposed to.

What would you do if you were at the Victoria Falls and saw the notice? Would you stay on the safe side of the notice?

I think you are saying, Yes, of course I would.

Yet when your parents tell you to stay away from something dangerous, do you always obey them? I don't think so.

But you should always remember that God expects you to obey your parents. He tells you to honour them. If you do not obey your parents, you are not honouring them.

And when your parents tell you not to do what is wrong – when they tell you to keep away from sin – do you obey?

Remember that it is dangerous to go too close to sin. If you do, you can fall very far down into worse and worse sins. You might never be able to stop.

What is the best way to keep away from sin? You should ask God to keep you safe. And you should ask Him to give you a new heart so that you would not want to sin.

Lydia

C H Spurgeon

Another chapter, abridged, from Spurgeon's book, *A Good Start*.

Lydia was a seller of purple. She belonged to Thyatira, a city famous for its dyeing trade. The women of Thyatira seem to have known the way of producing a specially delicate and valuable purple fabric. Lydia may have lived at Philippi during part of the year to dispose of her goods, while her goods were produced at Thyatira. It was very easy to get from one place to the other. Thyatira was in that part of Asia where Paul was forbidden by the Spirit to go and preach; if Lydia had been at home, she could not have heard the truth. And as "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God," she must have remained unconverted. But providence brought her to Philippi at the right time. Here is the first link of the chain.

But how is Paul to be brought there? He must, first of all, be shut out of Bithynia; and he must be silenced in his journey through Mysia; he must be brought to Troas, close to the sea; he must look across the blue sea and think of Europe's needs; in the visions of the night he must be prompted to cross to Macedonia; he must make his way to Philippi at the very time when Lydia is present; he must find out the little prayer meeting by the river, for God has ordained that Lydia shall be saved. God rules and overrules all things to bring that woman and that apostle to the same spot, for everything in God's providence is working together for the salvation of the elect.

In Lydia's case, grace was in a certain way preparing her soul. She did not know the Saviour, yet she knew many truths which were excellent stepping-stones to a knowledge of Jesus. If not a Jewess by birth, she was a proselyte – someone who followed the Jewish faith – and therefore well acquainted with the Word of God; she was one who worshipped God. Though she was far away from the synagogue – some forget the Sabbath when they travel abroad – yet when the day came round, she joined that little handful at the riverside. I suppose she had read Isaiah and could remember such words as these: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief. . . . He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so He openeth not His mouth."

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, she did not understand the Scriptures she had read, because there was no one to guide her. But they had prepared her mind; the ground had been ploughed ready for the good seed. She worshipped God, looking for the coming of the Messiah, and so her mind was prepared to receive the gospel. Doubtless there was in many of us a preparation for Christ before He came to us in quickening grace. I know that the pious

example of a godly father and the loving instruction of a tender mother had softened some of us somewhat, so that we were close by the edge of the healing stream though we were still unsaved. There was not that sudden change which we have seen in others. We ought to ascribe all this preparatory work to God's grace. Before grace renews the heart, there is grace preparing us for grace. Grace may be setting the mind active, clearing us from prejudice, ridding us of a thousand sceptical thoughts, and so raising a platform from which divine grace conducts us into the region of the new life. Such was the case of Lydia; such is the case of many.

Her conversion took place in the use of the means. Although God works great wonders and calls men when they are not hearing the Word, yet we must usually expect that God will meet with them when they are in the way. It is extraordinary that the first conversion in Europe was at a very small prayer meeting. There were only a few women there; we have no reason to think that there were more men than just Paul and his friend Luke. They had called in at the prayer meeting, as we say, accidentally, and had been moved to give an address, which was the means God used to open Lydia's heart. Let us never neglect the means of grace wherever we are; let us not forget the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is. Even if you are unconverted, may you always meet with the Lord's people. Do not say, "Only a prayer meeting!" God loves to honour prayer, and you may hope that, even if the Sabbath service has not been blessed to you, you may meet with God on the Monday evening – perhaps in a little cottage where only a few people are present. Be diligent in the use of the means; be in God's house as often as the doors are open and your duties will permit, for Lydia's conversion took place in the use of the means.

It was most certainly a work of grace, for we are told that the Lord opened her heart. She did not open her own heart; her prayers did not do it; Paul did not do it. The Lord Himself must open the heart to receive the things which make for our peace. We can get at human brains, but God alone can operate savingly on human hearts. It is the work of grace to reach them in such a way that the enemy of God shall become His friend, and the stony heart be turned into flesh. And nothing short of God's power can bring it about.

Lydia's good works did not end when she was baptized; she then wanted the apostles to come to her house. She bore the shame of being thought a follower of the crucified Jesus, a friend of the despised Jewish apostle. She constrained Paul to come, for there was love in her heart. While she had a crust, it would be broken with the man who brought her to Christ; she would give not only a cup of cold water in the prophet's name, but her house would shelter him. Those people who pretend to be Christ's people, yet live

only for themselves and do nothing for Him or His Church, give poor evidence of being born again. Love to the people of God has ever been a distinguishing mark of the true convert. Look then at Lydia and let the prayer go up: “Lord, bring in Lydias according to Thy mighty grace.”

“The Lord opened Lydia’s heart, so that she attended to the things that were spoken.” No doubt the Lord removed prejudice. Prejudice is an evil which we have to fight against in very many people. In Lydia’s case it would be Jewish prejudice; perhaps the report had reached her about Jesus of Nazareth; she knew that her people had even said, “His blood be on us, and on our children”. Yet God removed all this prejudice from Lydia’s mind; she gave Paul a fair hearing. She weighed the matter to see whether these things were so or not – somewhat like the Bereans of old, who also had their hearts in a measure opened, for they searched the Scriptures to see whether things were so. The devil often covers men from head to foot in a coat of armour, so that there is very little hope of them being wounded by the arrows of God, because there is scarcely a joint of the harness which the devil has not protected by an iron rivet of prejudice.

When her heart was opened, her desires were awakened. She felt now a wish to understand what the Apostle was saying about eternal salvation – about complete pardon by the blood of Him who was the “Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world”. Then her understanding was opened; she had a clear view of the gospel; she could see in its height and depth and length and breadth just that which her soul wanted. Then she felt growing within her a love to Him who, though He was equal with God, took upon Himself the form of a servant. As she heard Paul describe His sufferings, she said, “I love that preaching; sweet to my ears are those doctrines of mercy”. She began already to rejoice, and “blessed are the people that know the joyful sound”. If they do not yet walk in the light of God’s countenance, yet they shall, for so is the promise.

Then came faith; she believed the whole of the record. She took it to be absolutely true, as Paul had stated, that there had been a Messiah; that He, according to Scripture, was the Son of God and was also the Son of man; that He had suffered, the just for the unjust; and that she, believing in Him, had her sins forgiven. All the other graces followed. She now hated her sins; she repented. She now loved righteousness, she sought after holiness, had a bright hope of the many mansions in the Father’s house. She now began to be obedient to Christ’s commands, and she went on towards perfection, adding to her faith courage, and to her courage experience, and to experience brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. All this the Master did by opening her heart to attend to the things that were spoken of by Paul.

Religion in Eastern Europe

4. Communism

Rev David Campbell

Last month's article looked at the influence of Islam.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Granville Waldegrave (1833-1913), an Englishman better known as Lord Radstock, was used to bring many Russians into contact with the gospel. The book *Lord Radstock and the Russian Awakening* by David Fountain, details the extent of his influence for good. At that time, the Russian Empire embraced many of the lands of Eastern Europe, including what is now Ukraine. Radstock built on the foundation of work done earlier in the nineteenth century. In the time of Czar Alexander I, in the early nineteenth century, over a million Bibles in 30 languages spoken in the Empire were distributed and later, in the 1870s, an official Russian translation of the Bible was produced.

The awakening took place largely within the official Orthodox Church. It reached vast numbers of the common people as well as the nobility, among whom it began. This aroused the hostility of the Church authorities, and the persecution which followed drove many from the Orthodox Church to form other Churches. There was also a non-religious movement against the existing order in politics and society; the result was a great desire among the common people for change. The Czars were totally determined to oppose this desire. It is widely accepted that Czar Nicolas II provoked the calamity of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 by the extreme measures he took against his own people.

In 1917, Marxist revolutionaries known as the Bolsheviks rose up against the government, and very soon they were ruling the country. Czar Nicolas II had given up his throne in an attempt to stem the tide of opposition among the people. But such an attempt could not succeed; the First World War was still raging, many Russians had been killed, the supply of food to the cities was poor and the past crimes of the regime were fresh in people's memories. As in many similar situations, the people blamed their troubles on those in authority – this time with good reason. When what seemed a worthwhile alternative arose professing to advance the interests of the common man, it was accepted with great enthusiasm. But there were disastrous consequences. The Bolshevik leaders were men with no regard for human life, as soon became clear. Among many others, the Czar and his family were brutally murdered so that there would be no danger of them seizing power again.

Thus began a century of untold misery and suffering, not only for Russia

but also for other parts of what became known as the USSR. Under Joseph Stalin, the most brutal of its leaders, thousands upon thousands of Christians, as well as political dissenters, were either murdered in cold blood or driven to death in labour camps or mental hospitals. The work of the gospel begun in the previous century was all but extinguished; many perished in the early years of Communist tyranny who had been converted during the awakening under Radstock and others.

We may briefly consider three ways in which the Communist authorities in Russia and Eastern Europe tried to repress religion: by persecution, by control and by fear. We must remember that Communism is violently atheistic; so they opposed all religion. Lenin, the first Bolshevik leader, spoke of religion as the opium of the people, which he was determined to “deliver” them from. Those who succeeded him believed the same ideas and tried to impose them on everyone else. The utter folly and wickedness of this has eventually dawned on most people in the civilised world. The fall of Communism is one of the greatest blessings in the sad history of the twentieth century.

Persecution. It is perhaps impossible to discover how many perished under Communist regimes in the former USSR and Eastern Europe, but the number is well above the combined death toll of both World Wars. In the Ukrainian famine which Stalin deliberately produced over the winter of 1932-3, even more people died than Jews during the holocaust. One modern writer calls it “one of the most under-reported atrocities of human history, a fact that contributes powerfully to Ukraine’s persistent sense of victimisation.” The basic excuse for persecution and death was being “anti-revolutionary”, and all organised religions were included in that charge. The smaller sects and independent Churches were most severely targeted.

Many Christians were condemned for crimes which they never committed. Charges of immorality were used to discredit Christians and so that the authorities could send them to exile in Siberia. A system known as the Gulag was set up there in which large numbers of ordinary decent people were worked to death. Women as well as men, and even children and the elderly, were sent there. If they did not die on their way there, they usually perished within a few years. Later, religious and political prisoners were assessed by doctors as mentally ill; they were then sent to mental hospitals for years at a time and given painful doses of dangerous drugs. Many died, and many others suffered mental and physical damage which remained with them for life.

Control of Churches. Even after many Christians were killed or put in prison, many others struggled on worshipping God according to their consciences. Many true believers witnessed faithfully to Christ and His gospel

in very difficult circumstances. In 1945 the authorities of the USSR set up a union of Evangelical and Baptist churches but restricted how they could operate. Many yielded to these restrictions so that they could meet together. Others chose to resist the attempt of the State to control the freedoms of the Church. These more faithful groups suffered severely for their stand. Many were tortured or killed and those who escaped lived in constant danger.

Remarkably, in this climate of state control, many were able to receive the Bible. We can be sure that those who, out of love to Christ and the gospel, suffered Communist persecution are among that cloud of witnesses who endured bonds and imprisonment, even to death, for His sake. We ought to remember that martyrs for the Christian faith are to be found in recent history as well as in the more remote past.

Fear. The whole structure of society under Communism was designed to instil fear in the people. One tactic was to send secret-police officers (the KGB) in the dead of night to take people away for questioning. Sometimes those arrested were never seen again. As technology advanced, the state was able to listen in to private conversations as well as Christian meetings, to obtain "evidence" against those viewed as a threat. So people saw it as dangerous to speak to each other, and trust between friends and relations was badly weakened. Even today, with the structures of Communism gone, suspicions and fears remain. It is remarkable that any Church could have survived such conditions. Clearly it is the Christian grace of love that casts out fear, and the help of God alone brought people through these very difficult times. As a result of the many restrictions and understandable fears, the doctrines of truth were not taught properly, and those who did have a saving interest in Christ were in much need of more teaching. How privileged we are to have free access to the sound teaching of godly, learned men who through their writings instruct us in the truths of Scripture!

When we look at the history of nations, it is sometimes very difficult to understand the ways of God in providence. We in Britain and elsewhere have enjoyed many gospel benefits and the Lord preserved us during the turmoil and danger of two World Wars. On the other hand, calamity was permitted to affect many millions under Communism in Eastern Europe and Russia. This contrast ought to make us deeply humble and thankful. Yet we must not forget that the sin of man is at the root of all evil and trouble in the world, and this accounts for the rise of Communism just as it accounts for every other evil. It would be good if people in these formerly-Communist countries were able to learn the lessons of the past and embrace the gospel of Christ which is being sent among them. How important for us too to learn these lessons and to value our precious inheritance.

For Junior Readers

Lighthouses

I wonder if any of you have ever visited a lighthouse? Lighthouses have been built since very early times as a warning to ships that they are approaching somewhere dangerous. When they see a lighthouse, these ships must change direction to prevent getting stuck on a sandbank or hitting rocks. Often these rocks are out of sight, under the surface of the sea, so that the sailors cannot see them. But someone was there before them; perhaps other ships were even shipwrecked there. So a lighthouse has been built to warn future sailors of the dangers.

Some people can be like lighthouses or beacons to those that follow them. They have experienced dangers, and they then warn others about these dangers so that they can avoid them.

King Solomon was one such lighthouse. At the end of his days, he wrote the Book of Ecclesiastes (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit). It was after a time of sin and sad backsliding from God. He explored many different ways of finding happiness in the world and proved that none of them brought him any.

What are you and your friends looking forward to in life? What do you hope to get? How do you hope to be happy? Perhaps some of you think that to succeed with your studies will bring happiness. You want to get top grades in school, a good degree and then a well-paid job.

Certainly it is good to work hard and do well, but will it satisfy your soul? No. And will it get you to heaven? No. Solomon, the wisest of men, pursued knowledge and learning, but he found that this path led in the end only to grief and sorrow. True satisfaction could not be found there.

Perhaps others of you think that you will find happiness in the so-called pleasures of life, which worldly people talk about so much. But Solomon tried that too. He tried eating, drinking and being merry. He tried spending money on houses, gardens, servants and cattle – and he was able to buy everything he wanted. I'm sure you believe you would be very happy if you could do that. But God shows us, through Solomon, that none of these things will really satisfy us; they will not bring us real, lasting happiness.

What about wealth and riches? I'm sure you sometimes think that you would be happy if you were really wealthy and had all the money you wanted. Solomon had that; he was a very wealthy king. Yet he can tell you from his experience: "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase". However much money you have, you will never be satisfied; you will always want more.

Will you not heed that warning and realise that “we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out”. We brought nothing into the world with us when we were born and we will take nothing away with us when we die. All these things have to be left behind when we enter the great eternity.

So Solomon in Ecclesiastes is like a lighthouse warning you of the danger of chasing after happiness and satisfaction in worldly wisdom, pleasures and riches. These are like rocks that will wreck your soul if you run into them.

But after showing you that these are all “vanity” – empty and worthless – Solomon ends the book by pointing you to the one true source of satisfaction: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: fear God, and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man”. Will you not pray to be kept from wrecking your soul on worldly things? And will you not resolve to say, like someone else once did: “Quitting therefore the world with all its vanities, we betake ourselves to what alone is free from vanity – the fear and service of God”?

J van Kralingen

Looking Around Us

Acceptable Drunkenness?

Jack McConnell, Scotland's first minister, was taking part in a question-and-answer session with more than 100 secondary pupils in the Inverness area. He rightly complained bitterly about the evils of binge drinking – that it often ends with assaults or worse, and has serious consequences for people's health.

As he spoke about these dangers, he made a strange remark: “I hope I'm not going to be seen as preaching to anybody”. Does that mean Mr McConnell does not really want to be seen warning against what is *wrong*? Or is he afraid that no one will listen to him if he does so? Things have come to a sad pass if preaching is seen as something no self-respecting teenager will listen to. But maybe that is not far from the truth – which is a very sad comment on spiritual conditions in Scotland today.

Even stranger was Mr McConnell's statement that it is acceptable to get drunk “once in a while”. One of his officials insisted that he had made this remark with adults, not youngsters, in mind. But drunkenness is never acceptable. When people are drunk, they commit other sins, which they might keep well away from if they were sober. Drunkenness is the cause of much unhappiness and is condemned by the Bible: “Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1). That is the kind of message young people and others need today.

The Importance of History

A spokesman for one of Britain's political parties wants history to be made compulsory for school pupils up to the age of 16. In a speech he declared, "Nothing is more important to the survival of the British nation than an understanding among its young of our shared heritage and the nature of the struggles, foreign and domestic, which have secured our freedoms".

There is a great deal of truth in his statement. There is clearly tremendous ignorance "when surveys show nearly a third of all 11 to 18-year-olds think that Oliver Cromwell fought at the Battle of Hastings". There is, no doubt, even greater ignorance about the contribution which true Christianity has made to British freedoms, especially at the Reformation. And one fears that this contribution would get very little attention in any attempt by today's schools to give young people an understanding of Scotland's heritage – or England's, which the spokesman probably had particularly in mind.

Of course, what school pupils – and everyone else – most need to learn about is the Bible as a revelation from God. But central to the British heritage are the great works of God in the past, particularly at the Reformation. So pupils should learn about men like Thomas Cranmer, Hugh Latimer and John Bradford. Although the English Reformation did not go as far as it might have done, these men took big strides towards putting the Church of England on a scriptural foundation. In any case, their work was brought to a sudden end when Edward VI died and they were sent to a cruel death – they were burnt at the stake under Queen Mary.

Before they were arrested, they – and many others who fled to Europe when persecution broke out – preached the gospel with great energy, and many sinners learned the way to heaven. Besides, the Church leaders got rid of much Roman Catholic superstition and many unscriptural practices. Their work laid the foundation for better days when the work of reformation was restored after Mary's death.

This is a significant part of what today's youngsters need to know. And if they do not understand what God did for Britain in the past, they will not understand how dangerous Roman Catholicism is and how disastrous it would be if that system should ever again gain power in this country.

If the history you learn at school leaves out the Reformation, or gives you a wrong picture of what happened, be sure to make up for it at home. You should read what you can about the Reformers and the great work they did.

But where are the teachers who understand how important the Reformation was? One fears they are very few. And let readers in Britain, and elsewhere, ask themselves: Do I value my spiritual heritage? You should be in no doubt that your spiritual heritage is tremendously important.

Youth Conference 2005

Arrangements

Venue: St Andrews.

Dates: Tuesday, March 29, to Thursday, March 31.

Chairman: Rev D A Ross.

Lower Age Limit: 16 years old.

Applications: To Rev D A Ross, F P Manse, Laide, Ross-shire, IV22 2NB, *as soon as possible* (the closing date is March 19). 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, March 29

2.30 pm

God the Father

What this Doctrine Teaches Us

by Rev J R Tallach

7.00 pm

“Go Ye into All the World”

Aspects of the Free Presbyterian Church’s Mission Work

by Rev John MacLeod

Wednesday, March 30

9.30 am

Marriage

What the Bible Teaches

by Rev G G Hutton

1.30 pm

Sites of Religious Interest in St Andrews

A Historical Tour

conducted by Rev J B Jardine

7.30 pm

A Time of Surprising Conversions

Jonathan Edwards and His Work, 1703-1758

by Rev K D Macleod

Thursday, March 31

9.30 am

The Man After God’s Own Heart

David the Son of Jesse

by Rev John MacLeod

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.