

The Young People's Magazine

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

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



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Felix's Opportunity

Felix was Governor of Judea for a period of eight years during the time of Paul. He administered the affairs of the district on behalf of the Roman Empire. He was an ungodly man whose rule was oppressive. He went so far as to hire a band of robbers to murder Jonathan, the High Priest of the time. And when Felix heard Paul defend himself against the Jews' false accusations he unjustly sent him back to prison.

It may have been just after Felix married his third wife Drusilla that he ordered Paul to be brought before them so that they might hear him speak about "the faith in Christ" – the Christian religion. What would Paul have said? He must have told them who Christ was: the Son of God, who became man. He would also have said why Christ came into the world: to suffer and die for sinners. And just as, at the earlier hearing, Paul had spoken about his belief "that there shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust," he would now have gone on to speak about Christ rising from the dead, and about Him ascending to heaven.

But we are specifically told that Paul "reasoned" with Felix about "righteousness, temperance, and judgement to come". Paul, though he was a prisoner, spoke as plainly to the Roman governor as to any other sinner. The Apostle told him what God requires of every human being: a righteous way of life – according to the righteous commandments given by the holy God. He also spoke of the need for temperance, or self-control. If Felix had exercised self-control – if he had restrained his sinful desires – he would not have married Drusilla; she was already the wife of a King Azizus in Syria. And Paul spoke too of how "we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ"; he would have pointed out that Christ will then pronounce sentence on those who did not live righteous lives, who did not exercise self-control. At the same time, he would have called Felix to repentance and to look to Christ for forgiveness.

And how did Felix react? He "trembled"; he was terrified. His conscience was busy; it told him that Paul was speaking the truth. Felix knew that he was not living a righteous life, not exercising self-control, and was on his way to

the judgement, where he would be condemned before a Judge who, unlike himself, would deal with everyone in perfect justice.

So what did Felix do? Did he ask Paul how he could begin to live a righteous life, restrained by God's commandments? Did he ask how his sins could be forgiven so that he would escape condemnation on the day of judgement? No, he took what he thought was the easy way out. He told Paul to go away. Then, he hoped, all these disturbing thoughts would go away with him and his conscience would go quiet.

And what about you? As you read your Bible, or as you hear your minister preaching about God's law, about your sins, and about the judgement to come, are you sometimes afraid? Does your conscience sometimes disturb you? And how do you react? Do you wish that the preacher would go away? Do you wish you could rise up out of your seat and go out, or at least put your fingers in your ears so that you would hear no more? Then your conscience would no longer be disturbed and, you feel, all would be well again. But all would *not* be well, because your conscience was speaking on behalf of God. It was impressing on you the fact that the preacher was speaking the truth. He was right to warn you about your sin and its consequences; he was right to tell you that, if you go on in sin, you will have to face the judgement and a lost eternity. We dare not trample on our conscience when it agrees with the Word of God; it is highly dangerous to harden our hearts against the claims of God.

But that is what Felix did. Because his disturbed conscience was making him feel uncomfortable, he hardened his heart and sent Paul away. Yes, he promised to hear Paul at "a convenient season", at some other opportunity. Probably he felt his conscience would protest too loudly if he said something like: I am never going to listen to you again. But did that other opportunity ever arise? In a sense, yes, it did. Felix sent for Paul many times, but he was not looking for further instruction in "the faith of Christ"; rather he hoped Paul would pay him a bribe so that he might be set free. But Paul would never pay a bribe, a practice which undermines proper justice.

It is almost certain that Felix never trembled again, whatever Paul may have said to him during these further meetings. Felix had an excellent opportunity to find Christ, and salvation through Him, when he and Drusilla listened to the Apostle telling him about true religion. He did not need further opportunities; indeed it was a declaration of rebellion against God to reject the perfect opportunity he then had.

How many people since Felix have tried to silence their consciences by promising themselves further opportunities! They will not submit to God; they will not live a life of righteousness and of self-control; they will not seek

the Saviour – not yet. But, they tell themselves, there will be an opportunity some time in the future when they will listen seriously and obediently to God's Word. Then they will submit to God and His demands; they will begin to seek Him; they will attend church regularly; they will study the Bible seriously; they will pray earnestly; they will give up their sins and live a holy life. But not yet!

They have, they tell themselves, lots of time ahead of them; they will have endless opportunities of finding salvation. But there are several things which they do not consider. First, they may not live nearly as long as they expect; life is uncertain; so they have *no* time to spare if they are to find salvation. Second, if they give up attending church and reading the Bible, for instance, they may never get round to doing so again. They may keep on promising themselves an opportunity at some time in the indefinite future, and yet the opportunity never seems to appear. Third, if they do continue to attend church and read the Bible, or if they begin again to do so, the truth may no longer make any impression on them. After a lifetime of resisting God's Word, their hearts may be too hard to respond to it. And fourth, when they get old, they may be too deaf to hear a sermon; they may be too disabled to go to church; or there may be no scriptural preaching within reach of where they stay. The opportunities they promise themselves may no longer exist.

But think of another man who trembled: the jailer in Philippi. After the earthquake, he had a wonderful opportunity. He met Paul and Silas, who could answer his question: "What must I do to be saved?" Clearly he had been made to feel his need of salvation; so he had no thought of delay in seeking a remedy for the needs of his soul. He was told: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved," and he did believe. He *was* saved and he lived the rest of his life to the glory of God.

We are to follow the jailer's example; we too are to obey the call to believe; that is why we are told about him in the Bible. There is also a good reason why we are told about Felix. It is not only that he figured in Paul's life story; he appears in the Bible as a beacon. He is a warning light to today's sinners, so that they would act differently – so that they would not follow him any further down the broad road that leads to a lost eternity, by relying on future opportunities that may never come.

Everyone needs salvation; they ought to seek it earnestly and urgently. However sinful they may have been, they will be safe if they come to Christ now. But however careful people may have been to avoid what they feel to be the most serious of sins, they continue to be in danger if they put off seeking salvation. Remember that you are to seek the Lord "while He may be found" – and that is *now*. No one has any right to delay.

“I Don't Like to Hear You Swear”

A boy, just 4 or 5, followed his mother onto a nearly-full train. She was obviously unwell and, as she looked around for somewhere to sit, a man offered her his seat. Another man asked the boy to sit on his knee and gave him his watch to play with. For a few minutes all went well; the boy sat happily answering the man's questions. Then the man gave the boy some sweets and started to talk about politics to another man sitting beside him. The discussion began in a good-natured fashion, but after some time it turned into an argument and the man began to swear and take God's name in vain.

At first the boy was very happy sitting with the man. But when the man began to swear, he looked up surprised. Then he started to cry, put down the watch, slipped down onto the floor and ran to his mother.

“Where are you going?” asked the man. “Come back, my boy,” he called; “come back. I thought you were very happy a few moments ago. What is the matter now?” And he felt in his pocket for something else that might amuse the boy. Then the man stretched out his hand to the boy, who clung to his mother and refused to take his hand.

“Tell me why you left me”, the man asked. And the boy's mother encouraged him to answer. She obviously had not heard the man arguing with the other passenger; indeed she was very surprised when her son answered: “The Bible says we must not sit in the seat of the scorner”.

For a moment the man looked angry, but he quickly calmed down and said pleasantly: “I hope you will not call me a scorner”. The boy did not answer; he just leant his head on his mother's shoulder.

The man asked again: “Why do you call me a scorner?” The boy was still a little upset as he answered, simply and earnestly: “I don't like to hear you swear”.

Then the man promised: “Come back and sit with me and I promise you I will never swear again”. And the boy did go back, but it was obvious that he was not as happy as he was at first.

But why did such a young boy answer as he did? His mother used to read him a chapter of the Bible every morning. She would try to explain it to him and then she would pray. That morning she had read Psalm 1. The first verse is: “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of *the scornful*”. When she explained what this verse says about the scornful man – someone who is scornful of God, who mocks Him and despises Him – she told her son that one of his sins is swearing. He believed her; so he thought that it would

be sinful for him to sit any longer with someone who was guilty of the sin of swearing.

He was clearly an obedient boy. I hope that, when he grew up, he was just as careful to remember what his mother taught him. And I hope he always felt the authority of God speaking to him in His Word.

Samson

3. Fatal Weaknesses

Rev J B Jardine

Last month's article began to consider the story of Samson's life. We now continue with the remaining three of five key events in his life. As a Nazarite, Samson stood under a special promise to God to keep from sin and to act according to the law of God. For this series, it would be helpful to read Judges 13-16.

(3.) Samson went down to Gaza, the Philistines' stronghold and their main city. He went at first to spy out the land but, when he saw a harlot there, he was unable to control his lust for her. The Philistines heard that Samson was in their city and got ready to take him prisoner. But Samson arose at midnight, took hold of the gates with the two gateposts and carried them away to the top of a hill overlooking Hebron. We believe that he arose at midnight through a conviction of his sin and that the strength given to him was an evidence of his genuine repentance.

To avoid this sin of Samson we must, like Job, make a covenant with our eyes. Remember his words: "I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I look upon a maid?" (Job 31:1). We must stick to the path of duty and keep away from the temptations of this world, however appealing they may be.

(4.) Samson went to the valley of Sorek, where he fell in love with a Philistine woman called Delilah. It was through this woman's wickedness that he was finally delivered to the Philistines. The Philistine lords bribed Delilah with a large sum of money to betray Samson. On three different occasions, Samson hid the source of his strength, but on the fourth he gave away the secret.

He explained that he was a Nazarite and that his uncut hair was the source of his strength. Samson fell by telling Delilah this secret. But his strength did not really lie in his hair; its length did not have any natural influence upon his strength one way or the other. His strength arose from his relationship to God as a Nazarite. His uncut hair was the sign that he was a Nazarite and so it was a pledge on God's part to continue Samson's supernatural physical

strength. If he lost the sign of his long hair, the badge of being set apart to God as a Nazarite, he would have publicly broken his vow, and so must lose the blessing. By allowing his hair to be cut he broke his covenant vow and the Spirit of the Lord departed from him; he became no more than an ordinary man. Samson's supernatural strength lay in the fact that the Lord was with him, and the Lord was with him only as long as he kept his Nazarite vow. When he cut his hair he was made to reap what he had sown and was left to fall into the hands of his enemies.

In this we have a very clear evidence of the Scripture truth: "Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4).

The Philistines knew by experience that force could not prevail against Samson, it was his own act of unfaithfulness to God, in placing Delilah before God, that deprived him of his strength. As someone has said, "Heaven leaves him to himself, as a punishment for his guilty indulgence". The Philistines put out Samson's eyes, which seems a fitting punishment for having indulged the lust of his eyes. The Philistines brought him down to Gaza and forced him to grind corn in the prison house. Grinding corn was women's work in the ancient world, a humiliating job for a man. During this time his hair began to grow. Sincere heart repentance went along with this growth.

(5.) The Philistines abused Samson. When they gathered together to make a great sacrificial feast to their god, Dagon, it is more than likely that Samson was to be the sacrifice. They attributed Samson's defeat to Dagon: "Our god hath delivered into our hands our enemy, and the destroyer of our country, which slew many of us" (Judges 16:24). In their drunkenness they called for Samson to entertain them as an unwilling court jester. About 3000 were on the rooftop that day, but we do not know how many were inside – perhaps as many as 7000.

No one seemed to realize that, with the growth of his hair, there was a possibility that his strength might have returned; perhaps they thought his blindness had disabled him enough. Samson wanted to be avenged for the loss of his two eyes. He prayed to God to be avenged, and the Lord heard him. Guided by a boy, he took hold of the two middle pillars which supported the upper part of the temple. He pushed against them and the house of Dagon fell. All the lords and the people present were killed.

Samson also died, but those he slew at his death were more than those whom he slew in his life (Judges 16:30). Samson's death is not to be considered as suicide, but as a selfless martyrdom. He had prayed, "Let me die with the Philistines", and he awaited the Lord's will. His prayer was the agonizing cry of a Nazarite full of the repentance of faith. Not only did

he sacrifice his will to the good of the nation and to his divine calling, but he surrendered his life to that end. Later his family came and took away his body and buried it. Samson had judged Israel for 20 years.

For Junior Readers – Lessons from the Life of John G Paton

24. Escape

Paton and his teachers had fled for their lives from their own mission station in Port Resolution. They were staying with the Mathiesons, on another part of the island of Tanna. One night they were attacked. The church and the fence running from the church to the mission houses, were set on fire. Paton left the safety of the house and attempted to stop the fire spreading to it by chopping part of the fence down. The Lord saved him from danger by sending a tornado which drowned out the flames and scared the warriors off. He and the teachers were safe for the time being.

For the rest of that night Paton did not sleep. He lay on the alert for any further attacks, with his little dog faithfully by his side. As the sun rose, friends to the missionaries came in tears to the mission station. They had heard that the warriors who failed in their attack the previous night were determined to return and kill the missionaries. At this very moment they would be gathering together. As the visitors were passing the news to the missionaries, they could hear the shouts and war-cries of the advancing warriors. The friendly islanders looked terrified and were keen to flee into the bush.

Just as the shouts and cries were reaching a peak, they heard another, different cry. Paton and the Mathiesons could not believe their ears. But the cry came again; “Sail O!” and was repeated over and over until it drowned out the war-cries. Paton did not dare to believe that another wonderful deliverance was to be given them, but at last he ventured out to see if it was true. And there in the bay was a ship, the *Blue Bell*.

Captain Hastings of the *Blue Bell* had received one of Paton’s letters some time before but had sailed past the Mathieson’s station on the way to Aneityum. But Paton’s friends on Aneityum had contacted the owner of the boat and pled with him to order the Captain to return to Tanna to rescue the people there, if indeed they were still alive. So Captain Hastings had returned along with 20 armed men, who came ashore in two boats.

When the islanders saw the ship sail into the bay they disappeared, leaving the Mathiesons and Paton to pack what belongings they could. By 2 o’clock in the afternoon they were ready to go, but then a new problem arose. Mr Mathieson, after the stress of the previous night and the days before then, was not able to think clearly. He decided that it would be wrong for him to leave Tanna; so he locked himself into his study, telling Mrs Mathieson and

Paton to go and leave him. Both Mrs Mathieson and Paton pled with him, arguing that this was not right. They told him that it was wrong to pray for God's protection and then not to take the way of escape provided; it was like a form of suicide. Still he refused to come out of the locked study.

Time was passing and it was nearly dark. At last Paton said: "It is now getting dark. Your wife must go with the vessel, but I will not leave you alone. I shall send a note explaining why I am forced to remain; and as it is certain that we shall be murdered whenever the vessel leaves, I tell you God will charge you with the guilt of our murder." On hearing this, Mr Mathieson was at last persuaded to come out. Then they all left at once for the shore to sail to the ship in the two waiting boats.

But because so much time had passed, the ship had drifted farther away. And as the two small boats tried to make their way to it, darkness folded around them. All hope of reaching the big ship was lost. Those in charge of the two small boats decided to head out of the rough sea to the bay of Port Resolution, where Paton's mission house was. They could guide themselves into it using the beacon of light from the flame of the volcano.

Once in the bay, they waited for daylight, anchoring as far as possible from the shore to avoid any gunshots. But there was no sign of the big ship. So the mate of one of the boats put all the passengers and the weakest seamen into one boat and the strong crew into the other. He went off with the strong crew in search of the large ship.

The boat left in the bay, with Paton and the Mathiesons and the remaining seamen, sat under the glaring sun with no water or food. During the afternoon they had a visit from Nowar and Miaki who rowed out to them in a canoe. Nowar brought them some coconuts and yams; but the food just seemed to make them thirstier. Miaki, up to his usual tricks, tried to persuade Paton to return to his house to collect his stuff. But they knew that everything had already been taken and smashed; so Paton refused.

Around 5 o'clock the large vessel came into view and, before darkness fell, they were all safely on board. The next day they landed on Aneityum, exhausted but glad to be in a place of safety. The crew were kind to the missionaries, but many of them were wearing some of Paton's clothes and they refused to give them back.

A few weeks later, on 11 March 1862, Mrs Mathieson became ill and died. Mr Mathieson was so saddened by his wife's death that he became weaker and weaker; he died three months later. They both died trusting in Jesus, having lived lives of service to Him. Paton was greatly saddened by the death of his dear friends and fellow-missionaries.

A life of service to the Lord, like the Mathiesons lived, is what we all

should be striving for. Many people devote their lives to good causes: doing charity work, giving money for the poor and starving in developing countries, giving their time and energy to go out to these places and help build and run schools and hospitals. Some people have even become famous for giving so much of their lives to people less well-off than themselves.

The problem is that some people think that, by doing all these good and kind things, they are earning themselves a place in heaven. But this is not the case. We can only go to heaven through the merit of Jesus Christ, who died for sinners. And we can only truly give our lives to the service of the Lord if our hearts are His. To have Christ as our Saviour is the first step we take in true service to Him. We cannot take this step by ourselves; so we have to ask God to make us able to take it. Are you doing this? *S M Campbell*

“Chosen not for Good in Me”

2. Preparing for the Ministry

Alex MacLean

This is the second part of a paper given at the 2006 Youth Conference on “the life and ministry of Robert Murray M’Cheyne”. The first part described M’Cheyne’s early years: his success in school and university, and his worldliness – until his godly brother’s death dealt a powerful blow to this love of the world.

By God’s blessing on the solemn event of his brother’s death, a change took place in Roberts’ life. Over the coming months it became clear that a saving change had taken place in his soul. The devil did not wish Robert to depart easily from his kingdom, and he met with temptations to go back to his former pleasures. But his conscience troubled him when he gave in to such temptations, even in his heart. He wrote, “I hope never to play cards again”, and, “Absented myself from the dance”. Instead of attracting him back to the world, these events were used to strengthen him; the result was that he quickly lost his fascination for the world.

Although he had many friends, Robert felt very lonely when his best friend, who had cared deeply for his soul, was taken from him. He longed to speak with someone about his spiritual state and about the Saviour whom he sought; it was not then common for people to go to their minister for help in spiritual matters. But about this time some of his friends were savingly changed, including his close friend, Alexander Somerville. They began meeting together to study the Bible, and the Greek and Hebrew languages, and to pray and help each other as they began their spiritual pilgrimage.

When the Lord is dealing savingly with someone, it is not always easy to

trace the workings of the Holy Spirit as He applies salvation; there may be much conflict and turmoil within the soul. Looking back, one may have a clearer picture of what happened and be more able to follow God's work in the soul. Times of joy and peace are followed by feelings of emptiness and lostness, with the soul mounting up and then going down into the depths again. So it is not always clear when one first comes to exercise faith in Christ as Saviour and when one is justified in the sight of God.

Let us look now at Robert's conversion and the evidence that this was indeed a saving work in his soul. He stated that there was nothing sudden in his experience but that he was led to Christ through convictions which were deep and lasting, but not awful. The Holy Spirit carried on His work in Roberts' soul by continuing to deepen in him a conviction of his ungodliness and the pollution of his whole nature. During the rest of life, he viewed his original sin, not as an excuse for his actual sins, but as an aggravation of them all.

Eternity became very real to him with the knowledge that he was before an ever-present God to whom he was accountable and that he was in a lost and sinful state. Sin became a reality to him and he was now convinced of the sins of his former days, especially his worldliness, pride and rejection of the Saviour. He became aware of the sins of his heart and, from then until his death, the spiritual conflict prevailed which Paul describes in his Epistle to the Romans. The Bible became a living book to him; it was from this source that he was to obtain what would sustain his soul.

Robert found the way of acceptance with God through the remedy provided in Christ Jesus while studying *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*, which is usually bound up with *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. He described this as "the work which I think first of all wrought a saving change in me". He was persuaded to embrace the Saviour by faith and not to rely on his own spiritual exercises or experiences, such as repentance and convictions, but on Christ and His imputed righteousness. He was convinced that only "he that comes to Christ" is saved. He had come to know that self-emptying and abasement which brings a sinner to an end of himself and to trust in the work of Christ alone for salvation.

A principle of holiness was planted in his soul; so by the work of the Holy Spirit he became a follower of holiness, "without which no man shall see the Lord". Many were to testify that his holiness had a great effect on them.

M'Cheyne examined himself regularly, not just to establish if he was one of the Lord's people, but to weigh the motives behind his actions. This included examining his motives for entering the Christian ministry. And, as he sought to be faithful to his Lord and his own soul, he was being prepared

to give advice to his brethren in time to come. He warned them about pride and self, which he discovered in his personal experience. He found that omitting to do what is right makes way for committing actual sins. And, having come to know Christ’s righteousness as his own covering, he longed to see others clothed in the same spotless robe.

M’Cheyne continued to write letters and poetry but there was now a noticeable change; he introduced more serious and spiritual matters. Instead of seeking to charm his female friends in romantic verse, he urged them to follow the course he had himself set out on, showing them the necessity of accepting Christ as their Saviour.

He wanted to spend his life in serving his Master and he felt grieved as he looked back on his former godless and worldly way of life. He was particularly concerned about this when he read of the useful lives of some ministers and felt himself “vile, useless, poor and so ungrateful”. But his friends were amazed at how the fear of God had already affected his whole life. The time had now come when he was praying: “Not unto me, not unto me, be the shadow of praise or of merit ascribed, but let all the glory be given to Thy most Holy Name”. He was utterly convinced that he was “chosen not for good in me”.

M’Cheyne applied to the Presbytery of Edinburgh to study for the ministry and began to attend the lectures of Professors Alexander Brunton, David Welsh and Thomas Chalmers. These three men had a marked influence on this young student’s life and ministry; what he learned from them would bear fruit in the years to come. He was joined in his theological studies by his close friend Alexander Somerville, from whom he was almost inseparable, and they also befriended the Bonar brothers, Andrew and Horatius.

Encouraged by Chalmers, these students began visiting in the slum areas of Edinburgh and what M’Cheyne found there was a culture shock. The deprivation, poverty and ignorance he met moved him to write, “Awake, my soul. Why should I give hours and days any longer to the vain world, when there is such a world of misery at my very door? Lord, put Thine own strength in me; confirm every good resolution; forgive my past long life of uselessness and folly.”

Each Saturday the members of this group of students met in Chalmers’ home and then went to visit the area allocated to them. M’Cheyne and Somerville worked in a part of the Canongate and their experience there gave them an insight into every form of the depravity of the sinner. John Bruce, M’Cheyne’s minister, joined the two students in their mission work. And shortly before beginning this work, M’Cheyne was encouraged by hearing that God had used him in awakening a soul to concern for sin.

Sarah

C H Spurgeon

Abridged from a chapter in Spurgeon's book *A Good Start*. He uses the verses: "Look unto Abraham your father and unto Sarah that bare you" (Isaiah 51:2), and, "Even as Sara obeyed Abraham calling him lord; whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement" (1 Peter 3:6).

How good when a godly man has an equally godly wife! But what a pain to a Christian woman to be yoked with an unbelieving husband! I remember a husband who all his life lived careless about the things of God, while his wife was an earnest Christian woman who saw all her children grow up in the ways of the Lord. The father died without giving any evidence of a change of heart. When she speaks of him, it is with fearful sadness; she does not know what to say, but leaves the matter in the hands of God. She often sighs, wishing "that, by a word or a look," she could have had some reason to "hope that my poor husband looked to Jesus at the last".

The same must be true of a husband who has an ungodly wife. However much God may bless him in everything else, it seems as if a part of that life which should be all light is left in thick darkness. Let those of us who are joined together in the Lord thank God every time we remember each other. Abraham had cause to praise God for Sarah, and Sarah for Abraham. I have not the slightest doubt that Sarah's character owed much of its excellence to Abraham; but I should not wonder if, when all is revealed, we discover that he owed as much to Sarah. Maybe Abraham would not have been all that he was if Sarah had not been all that Sarah was. We thank God if we, like Abraham, are favoured with holy marriage partners, whose good-natured tempers and loving characters tend to make us better servants of God.

God does not forget the lesser lights. Abraham shines like a star of the first magnitude, and we do not at first sight observe that other star close to his side shining with a lesser brightness. To the common eye Abraham is the only character, and many overlook his faithful wife, but God does not. Our God never misses good people who are obscure. You may be sure that God does not fix His eye only on those who are strong. You may remember how it is written that He who counts the stars and calls them by name also binds up the broken in heart and heals all their wounds. He who treasures the names of His apostles notes also the women who followed Him. He who marks the brave martyrs and bold preachers of the gospel, also remembers those helpers who labour in quiet places. In His care for the greater, God does not forget the less. Sarah, as well as Abraham, was in life covered with the shield of the Almighty; in death she rested in the same tomb; in heaven

she has the same joy; in the Book of the Lord she has the same record.

It would be well for us to imitate God in remembering the lesser lights. I do not know that great men are often good examples. I am sorry when men are held up to imitation because they have been clever and successful, though their motives and morals have been questionable. I would prefer men to be stupid and honest than clever and tricky; it is better to act rightly and fail altogether than succeed by falsehood and cunning. I would prefer to bid my son imitate an honest man who has no talent and whose life is unsuccessful, than point him to the cleverest and greatest that ever lived, whose life has become a brilliant success, but whose principles must be condemned. Do not be dazzled by success, but follow the safer light of truth and right. Some of the choicest virtues are not seen so much in the great as in the quiet, obscure life. The fairest and richest virtues are often found in the humblest individuals. Do not therefore always be studying Abraham, the greater character. Does the text not say, "Look unto Abraham, your father, and unto Sarah that bare you"? You have not fully learned this lesson until you have been in the tent with Sarah as well as among the flocks with her husband.

God does not by His grace lift us out of our place. A man is made gentle, but he is not made a fool. A woman is made brave, but grace never made her domineering. Grace does not make the child so self-willed that he disobeys his father; something else does that. Grace does not take away from the father his authority to command the child. The fruit in believers' lives matches their position. Thus Sarah is beautified with the virtues that adorn a woman, while Abraham is adorned with the excellences which suit a godly man. If the circumstances require courage, God makes His servant heroic; if the circumstances require modesty and caution, modesty and caution are given.

Faith works marvels; it achieves impossibilities; it grasps what cannot be understood. Faith can be used anywhere – touching the ear of God in the highest heaven and winning our desire from Him, and cheering the poor in the lowest places of the earth. Faith will quench the violence of fire, turn the edge of the sword, snatch the prey from the enemy, and turn the alien to flight. There is nothing it cannot do. Those who have been taught the sacred art of believing God are the truly learned. If Abraham walks before God and is perfect, if he smites the kings who have carried Lot captive, the same faith makes Sarah walk before God in her perfection; she too is written among the worthies of faith who magnified the Lord. There were two fruits of faith in Sarah: she did well, and she was not afraid with any amazement.

She did well *as a wife*. She was all her husband could desire and when she died at the age of 127, Abraham wept for her with the most genuine tears of sorrow. He wept for the loss of one who had been the life of his home. All the

duties that lay on her in that travelling company were performed admirably, and we find no fault mentioned about her in these things.

She did well *as a hostess*. It was her duty, with her husband, to entertain guests. The one instance recorded, no doubt, represents her practice. Though she was truly a princess, yet she kneaded the dough and prepared the bread for their guests. They came unexpectedly, but she made no complaint. She was always ready to lay herself out to perform what was one of the highest duties of a God-fearing household in those times.

She did well also *as a mother*. We are sure of this because her son Isaac was an excellent man. While there are, of course, exceptions, the boy's character is, in the hand of God, formed by the mother. Sarah by faith did her work with Isaac well. In yielding to his father, when he was to be offered up as a sacrifice, we see in him evidence of a holy obedience and faith in God which were seldom equalled and never surpassed.

It is written that God said, "I know Abraham, that he will command his children and his household after him". Wherever he went, he set up an altar to the Lord. Do you always make these two things go together: a tent and an altar? Is there sure to be family worship wherever you live? I am afraid many families neglect it, often because husband and wife are not agreed about it, and I feel sure that Abraham would not always have set up the worship of God in his tent unless Sarah had been as godly as himself.

She did well also *as a believer*, and that is important. When Abraham, as a believer, was called to separate from his people, Sarah went with him. She continued with him, going on believing in God. Though they had no city to dwell in, she continued, with her husband, looking for "a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God". She believed God's promise with all her heart, for though she laughed once, it was only a slip for the moment, for it is written in Hebrews 11: "Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised".

Though we preach faith as the great means of salvation, we never say that you are saved, unless a change is wrought in you and good works are produced in you; for "faith without works is dead, being alone". Faith saves, but it is that faith which causes men to do well. And the faith which leaves a man just what he was, and permits him to indulge in sin, is the faith of devils – perhaps not so good as that, for "the devils believe and tremble", whereas these hypocrites profess to believe, yet seem to have no fear of God whatever. Sarah had the testimony from the Lord that she did well; and all of you who believe are her daughters if you do well. Take care that you honour your spiritual parentage and maintain the honour of the elect family.

For Younger Readers

Something Far Better

The Harris family lived in a village in Wales. There were three brothers: Joseph, Thomas and Howell.

Joseph was the oldest brother. He became the blacksmith in his village. People from the village, and round about, would come to his workshop with their horses, and Joseph would make new horseshoes and nail them to the animals' hooves.

But Joseph was able to do more difficult work than a village blacksmith. He went to London and began to work in the Royal Mint. All the coins used in the country were made there. In the end, it was his job to check that all the pennies and other coins were made exactly right. Joseph Harris became a very important man and earned a lot of money.

Thomas too went to London. He was a tailor; he made uniforms for soldiers. He probably had lots of men working for him, making these uniforms. Thomas Harris also made a lot of money and lived in the Tower of London. He too became a very important man.

Joseph and Thomas wanted Howell to come to London. They wanted him to become important too, and to earn a lot of money. But Howell was far more interested in something else. He knew that the best thing in life is not to be important or to have a lot of money. It is to do what is right, to love God and to believe in Jesus.

Howell was right. And he tried to tell others about these things. He walked long distances so that he could preach to people. He warned them about their sins and pointed them to Jesus Christ as the Saviour of sinners.

Almost nobody now has heard of Joseph and Thomas Harris. But lots of people have heard about Howell Harris, although he lived long ago. And what is far better, he is in heaven now; he is perfectly happy and he is perfectly holy.

Do you want to be important and earn a lot of money? Always remember that there is something far better: to do what is right, to love God and to believe in Jesus. Ask God to make you want these things far more than anything else.

For Your Bookshelf?

Behind a Frowning Providence, The Life of Joseph, by B A Ramsbottom, published by Gospel Standard Trust Publications, paperback, 46 pages, £2.95, available from the Free Presbyterian Bookroom.

Here is a book about Joseph, particularly about Joseph's providence. But what do we mean by *providence*? Mr Ramsbottom gives a very good answer: "God fulfilling in time what He has planned in eternity".

The author shows us the lessons we should learn from each part of the story. He begins with Joseph in the family home and warns against favouritism – for the coat of many colours "marked a person out as very important". Jacob unwisely marked Joseph as his favourite by giving him this coat.

The next point is that Joseph feared God. And it is emphasised that this important principle "affected his behaviour right through his life. This is vital, especially in the life and behaviour of young people." And what is the fear of God? "It does not mean being afraid of God, frightened of Him, but a loving, tender awe and reverence." This point is followed by some paragraphs on Joseph's dreams, but the discussion of dreams in general needs a few words of caution.

Joseph was sold into Egypt because of his brothers' jealousy. But this, as with everything that happens in life, must be viewed as part of God's providence. So, for Joseph, "everything seemed to be going wrong, and yet in God's sight everything was going right". When Joseph was tempted by Potiphar's wife, Joseph "knew he was in the sight of God's all-seeing eye and, kept by the power of God, the fear of the Lord prevailed," because Joseph saw the sin to which he was tempted as "*great wickedness*".

Mr Ramsbottom points out Joseph's kindness to his fellow prisoners and comments: "The kindness of God's people even to strangers has been one of the great witnesses to the truth of God down the ages. The world does not understand the doctrine of predestination, but it does understand kindness."

"Have you ever thought", the author asks, "how incredible it is that the great Pharaoh should believe Joseph, a poor prisoner," when he explained the king's dream? The answer is: "The hearts of all men are in the Lord's hand, to dispose just as He pleases".

The chapters of this book are based on talks which Mr Ramsbottom gave to the young people in his congregation on Sabbath afternoons. Here is good teaching which should help young people, and others, to understand the lessons that we are meant to draw from the history of Joseph; it may also help them to read other historical passages with greater understanding and apply the lessons to themselves. The book is heartily recommended.

Scripture and Catechism Exercises 2007-08

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Looking Around Us

A Skilful Pilot

A plane on its way from London to Melbourne had to make an emergency landing in the Philippines after a large hole appeared in its fuselage. It was a Boeing 747 belonging to the Australian airline, Qantas Airways. The aircraft, with 346 passengers and 19 crew aboard, diverted to Manila about an hour after leaving Hong Kong and landed safely.

Passengers described hearing a large bang, probably due to an oxygen cylinder exploding. They then felt a rush of wind and saw debris flying through the cabin. While no one panicked, a passenger reported, you could “see in their faces that they were really scared”. As the plane lost pressure inside, oxygen masks dropped down and the pilot quickly but skilfully brought the plane down from 29 000ft to 10 000ft. This would have added to the passengers’ fright, but at the lower height they could breathe normally.

“There was notable relief when we landed” another passenger reported. “Everyone applauded the pilot. We are very lucky; we landed safely and no one was hurt.”

Yes, the skill of the pilot was duly acknowledged. But there was no suggestion that anyone ought to acknowledge God’s goodness in bringing them safely onto the runway at Manila’s airport. The passengers could see that the outcome might easily have been very different; at least one of them pointed to luck – some unknown force that may smile on you or frown at you; no one can tell why. But the truth is that, as Joseph experienced, there is a God – a living Being, not an impersonal force – who is ruling over everything that happens.

When we get safely to the end of any journey, we should thank God for taking care of us. And how often we reach the place we are travelling to without noticing any danger at all! Do we then stop to acknowledge that God has been watching over us and that He – not luck – has brought us safely on our way?

But there is a more important journey than a flight from London to Melbourne, and we are all at some stage on that journey – the journey to eternity, to either heaven or hell. How important for us to commit ourselves to that infinitely-skilful Pilot, Jesus Christ, who will then watch over us and take us safely to the very end of our journey. If we reach heaven – and that will be the end of our journey if we believe in Jesus – we will never stop thanking the Saviour for bringing us safely there.

Price 70p