

What If It All Be True?

By Horatius Bonar

JOHN NEWTON had a pious mother, who was taken from him when he was only seven years old. She taught him, when but an infant, to pray, and sowed in his young heart the seeds of his future spiritual life.

When a boy he was led to think much of God and of eternal things; but his impressions wore off, and he entered on a course of sin. It seemed as if he had broken loose from all bonds, and delighted only in what was evil.

While in this impenitent state he was thrown from a horse, and was in great danger, but his life was preserved. Then his conscience awoke once more, and he trembled at the thought of appearing before God, sinful and unready. Under this dread he forsook his sins for a while, and gave up his profane living and speaking; but the reformation was only outward, and did not last long.

At another time, dread of God's wrath overtook him, and he began to live, as he thought, a very religious life. He thought to make himself righteous, and so to win God's favor. He spent much time in reading the Scriptures; he prayed; he fasted; he would hardly trust himself to speak, lest he should utter a vain or sinful word. Ignorant of God's righteousness, he was bent on having one of his own, by which he hoped to pacify his conscience, and get quit of his fear of coming wrath.

This state of mind lasted a year or two, and then he gave up religion altogether, and became an infidel. He now rushed into wickedness of every kind; and yet he only became more wretched. He went to sea on board a slave ship, and took part in that horrid trade. He was reduced to utter poverty—starving, and sinning, and blaspheming—his heart hard and his conscience seared. He was in very deed the prodigal son, wasting his substance with riotous living, but not yet “coming to himself,” and saying, “I will arise, and go to my father.” Once and again he was in peril of his life by sea and land. Half-intoxicated, and dancing on deck one midnight, his hat went overboard, and he was throwing himself after it when laid hold of and dragged back by his comrades. Thus he hurried on in sin, as he himself in one of his hymns describes it:

“In evil long I took delight, Unawed by shame and fear.”

Finding one day a religious book on board the vessel, he took it up, and looking into it, was led to ask the question, “WHAT IF THESE THINGS SHOULD BE TRUE?” The thought terrified him, and he closed the book. He went to his hammock that night as usual, having contrived to put this solemn question out of his mind. In the dark night he was awakened by the dash of waves. A storm had risen, a terrible sea had swept over the vessel, and the cabin where he lay was fast filling. The cry rose, “The ship is sinking!” All was confusion and terror. He twice made for the deck but was met upon the ladder by the captain, who bade him bring a knife. As he was returning for the knife, a man went up in his place and was washed away.

Thoughts of other days began to come back upon him; the remembrance of those whom he had loved affected him, and his heart seemed softening. For four weeks the vessel was tossed to and fro, he being sometimes at the helm and sometimes at the pumps, wave upon wave breaking over him. Then, in the midst of danger, day and night his cry went up, “O God, save me, or I perish;” and, “The God of the Bible forgive me for His Son's sake;” and, “My mother's God, the God of mercy, have mercy upon me.”

That storm was to John Newton what the earthquake was to the jailer at Philippi: it brought him to his knees. It brought his sins before him. It brought before him his eternal ruin. It brought him to the cross and blood of Christ. The hymn of which we have already quoted the first two lines goes on to tell his experience:

“In evil long I took delight, Unawed by shame and fear, Till a NEW OBJECT struck my sight, And stopped my wild career.”

The “new object” which met his eye, as he stood at the helm or walked the deck, with the waves dashing over him, was the crucified Christ. The cross, and the Son of God there bearing our sins, stood out before him in the brightness of Divine love. For thus he sings:

“I saw one hanging on a tree In agonies and blood, Who fixed His languid eyes on me, As near His cross I stood.”

As it was with Simon Peter when the Lord turned and looked upon him, so was it with John Newton. In both cases the look of love melted the sinner down:

“Sure never till my latest breath Can I forget that look; It seemed to charge me with His death, Though not a word He spoke.”

That look of love, holy love, went through and through his conscience, making him feel his sin in all its vileness. *Sin*, which had hitherto been treated by him as a mere trifle, or been altogether overlooked, now presented itself in all its terrors. He was doomed; he was lost; what shall he do?

“My conscience felt and owned the guilt, And plunged me in despair; I saw my sins His blood had spilt, And helped to nail Him there.”

He is overwhelmed; he is in despair. That look of holy love has smitten him through and through. It says to him: “Thou art the man; thou didst it all; thou hast nailed Me to the tree; had it not been for thy sins, I had not been here.” But as he looks, he sees something more in that look, and hears the voice of pardon coming from the cross:

“A second look He gave, which said, I freely all forgive: This blood is for thy ransom paid, I die that thou may'st live.”

This second look speaks of peace. He reads forgiveness in it—free forgiveness to the chief of sinners—forgiveness to “the old African blasphemer,” and his troubled conscience is pacified. “I have found a ransom,” is the message which removes his terror; and this ransom is by the blood and death of the Son of God. That ransom suffices. God looks at it and is satisfied; He says it is enough. The sinner looks at it and is satisfied. He says it is enough. The burden of guilt is unloosed, and falls from his shoulders. He is set free from guilt, from terror, from bondage. He knows the blessedness of the man whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered. He has believed, and he is saved; nay, and he knows that he is saved, for he credits the heavenly record concerning Him to whom he is looking:

“Thus, while His death my sin displays In all its blackest hue, Such is the mystery of grace, It seals my pardon too.”

Forgiveness through the blood of the Lamb—forgiveness through the belief of the Holy Spirit's testimony to the finished work of Immanuel—this is now his resting-place; and his whole life is changed. That holy pardon had made him a holy man.

And now let us come back to the first thought that struck him—“WHAT IF ALL THIS BE TRUE?” Here is a question for us, no less than for him.

If eternity be a reality, then it becomes me to prepare for it, for endless terror or endless joy can be no trifle. If I must live forever, then I must seek so to live here as to make that everlasting living a happy one. Otherwise it had been good for me that I had never been born.

If sin be a fact, then I must not trifle with it; and if God hates it utterly, then I must hate it too, and I must get quit of it. And I must get quit of it in God's way, for no other way of deliverance will avail. That which is so awfully real and powerful as sin is, can only be taken away by something as real and as powerful as itself.

If the cross of Christ be true, then I must deal with it accordingly. It is meant to be the death of sin and the life of righteousness. It is meant to be the fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. It is meant to be the place where all sin is borne by another for us, so that we live by the death of another, and are pardoned by the condemnation of another. My acceptance of the great work done there is my deliverance from wrath, and sin, and death. I am not bidden to *work* for pardon: I get it freely, and without desert. I am not bidden to *wait* for pardon: I get it at once as a finished and provided gift, bestowed upon every one who will go to God for it, and take it in His appointed way.

If all these things be true, then I must be *in earnest*. Everything connected with God and Christ, with sin and pardon, with life and death, with wrath and favor, with time and eternity, is so unspeakably momentous, that I must be up and minding these things without delay. If I am not in earnest, I am a fool; for what shall it profit me to gain the whole world and to lose my soul? I must seek the right thing. I must seek it in the right way, I must go straight to God for all I want; and I must meet Him at the cross.

I knew one who was all his life seeking, and yet he never seemed to find. He was trying to be happy, but knew not how. He was rich, and had everything that this world could give him. He went about from place to place in search of pleasure. He lived a long life, and spent it in the midst of luxury, eating and drinking and making merry. He had broad lands; he had many friends; and his house was filled with pictures, and statues,

and everything that art could provide for him. Yet his weary eye told you that he was not happy. Life seemed to have no joy in it; and yet every day, from morning to night, he was going about in quest of joy. “Who will show me any good?” was his cry. But the good never came. He passed through life weary and unhappy, though apparently possessing all its pleasures. He died about the age of fourscore, and he did not seem ever to have known a happy day. He lived in vain, both for himself and others.

My friend, would you be *happy*? You must go to God for His love and joy. This world, with riches and pleasures to the full, will do nothing for you. It cannot give you peace. But the God who made you can give you peace—His own satisfying peace. Go *immediately*, and get it from Him. He giveth to all liberally, and upbraideth not.

Would you be *safe*? You must seek your safety in the Son of God, and beneath the protection of His cross. In Him only you are safe. His cross is a shield and hiding-place for time and eternity. Time will soon pass away; the last trumpet may soon sound, and you must stand before the judgment-seat of Christ, to give account of the deeds done in the body. Seek *immediate safety* in Christ Jesus, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. He is able to save to the uttermost them that come unto God by Him. He waits to welcome the guilty. He loves to bless the sinner. Go to Him now, and deal with Him fully, and fervently, and honestly, about that soul of yours. He will not send you empty away.