



## The Preacher Who Didn't Believe the Bible!

*Marshall J. Grosboll*

Today, millions of people who grew up as Christians are discarding their Bibles. The Bible is more common and less read today than at any time since Christian history began. Evolution is taught as a fact of life in school, and the Bible is treated as some old fairy-tale. "Oh," they admit, it has some good moral principles in it, but it is not to be taken as true!

Even some preachers have come to believe in evolution! In our story today we recount the experience of how one would-be preacher, who didn't believe the Bible, came to change his mind. In the Bible lesson that you will want to study after reading this story, you will find out how you can know whether the Bible really is the infallible, inspired word of God or not. But first, let's hear the story:

William Miller was an intellectual and read the great classics of the day. He was also a Deist, which means he believed in a "supreme being" but didn't believe that this supreme being had anything to do with planet earth. He believed that at some time, millions of years ago, the earth was created by this supreme being, but after that the earth was left to evolve at will. He didn't believe in the Bible, or in Jesus, or in eternal life.

To be polite, Miller attended the local Baptist Church where he was raised. His uncle was the pastor and was a good speaker but when he was gone the deacons read the sermon. After church, he would go home and mimic the way the poor deacons had read the sermon-gestures and all. He knew just how to make it entertaining and everyone was soon rolling with laughter. But after a while that got boring, so he quit attending church altogether except when his uncle was preaching.

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"We missed you at service last Sunday," his mother said one day after he had missed as usual.

"You can't expect me there when Uncle's gone, Mother."

"Why not, my son?"

"It's the way the deacons read the sermon."

"They do the best they can, I'm sure," she replied.

"When Uncle's away, Mother, why don't they let me read it?"

He didn't think they would take him—who didn't even believe in the Bible—up on this sarcastic suggestion. But they did! The deacons knew how Miller had made fun of them, and now they were going to make sure that he had his turn to read! Thus Miller unwittingly set a trap for himself. The sermons they assigned him to read were from Alexander Proudfit's *Practical Discourses*. Somehow, Sunday after Sunday as he read the sermons, they began to sober him. Moreover, he was reminded of experiences from the war that he had just returned from.

William Miller had been a captain in the American-British war of 1812. Convinced that love of country rather than love for Christ was mankind's greatest hope, Miller had volunteered for service in this second war for American independence. Forty-seven others also volunteered, on condition that they serve directly under his command!

The War of 1812 was a desultory, do-nothing affair most of the time. The Battle of Plattsburg, fought on a shore of Lake Champlain not many miles from Miller's boyhood home, was a brilliant exception.

During the first two years of the war, Britain had been heavily involved in fighting Napoleon Bonaparte, but after his abdication on April 4, 1814, the British could give full attention to their American encounter.

The British brought some of their best troops, seasoned from years of successful fighting against Napoleon's army, and sailed them past Quebec on the St. Lawrence River and on into New York and Vermont via the mighty lake Champlain.

On the morning of September 11, 1814, the British, with 15,000 seasoned soldiers, supported by a well-equipped navy on the lake, met the Americans near the city of Plattsburgh, New York. The Americans numbered only 5,500 recently recruited soldiers, most of whom had never seen a battle. Without navy, numbers, or experience, many of the Americans were certain of defeat, but determined to show the American spirit and fight to the last. William Miller was a captain on the American side.

The outcome was a total surprise. Listen to the excited report of one of the young, enthusiastic American officer's as he described the outcome in a letter he transcribed after the battle, dated 2:20 p.m. that very day.

"Sir: It is over, it is done," the officer writes. "The British fleet has struck to the American flag. Great slaughter on both side—they are in plain view, where am I now writing. . . . The sight was majestic, it was noble, it was grand. This morning, at 10:00 a.m. the British opened a very heavy

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and destructive fire upon us, both by water and land. Their ... rockets flew like hailstones .... You have no idea of the battle.... You must conceive what we feel, for I cannot describe it."

The officer reviewed with pride the part that he had played. "I am satisfied that I can fight. I know I am no coward. . . . Three of my men are wounded by a shell which burst within two feet of me."

"Huzza! Huzza!" he exclaimed in his excitement; and then, as 20 or 30 prisoners were led into the fort, he carefully signed his name: "Yours forever, William Miller".

At first, William Miller was too excited at the unexpected victory to think about the impossibility of a shell bursting two feet from him without killing or even injuring him! But later, upon reflection, he began to wonder how that could be. Furthermore, if there was no personal God, and everything happened without intervention, how could 5,500 ill-equipped and inexperienced Americans defeat a much larger regiment of seasoned British troops, complete with Naval support!

Back at his home, as he milked his cows and plowed his farm, his mind continued to probe into the mystery of it all. The patriots, by and large, were Christians who believed in God. By the law of cause and effect, he reasoned, the victory of Plattsburgh ought to have gone to the British—could God indeed have honored the Patriots' faith? A modern historian has called Plattsburg the "decisive action" of the war, and the American Commodore, in his report to the war office at the time, gave the glory to God, stating that "The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal victory." Was it possible, perhaps, that God had taken a personal interest in America?

Thus it was that when William Miller, a man who did not believe in a personal God, was caught in a trap and forced to read the Sunday sermons at his Baptist church, he was sobered. He was moved by the messages that he had once scoffed at, and he was reminded of the "impossibilities" that had happened during the war.

September 11, 1815, rolled around, the one-year anniversary of the victory of Plattsburg. A public dance was scheduled; a sermon, too, on the night before. The visiting evangelist sent the people home bathed in tears. A revival was on and the dance was off. Next Sunday it was Miller's turn to read again, this time it was a homily of Proudfit called, *The Duty of Parents to Their Children*. Overcome by emotion in the middle his message, he could not make it to the end. The Holy Spirit, believed or unbelieving, was touching his heart!

In despair over his sins, Miller imagined how good it would be to throw himself into the arms of a Saviour and trust completely in His grace.

He needed a Saviour. The world needed a Saviour. But did such a wonderful being exist?

Back to the Bible he went; and in its covers he found the Savior whom he sought. "I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God," he wrote later. "They became my delight, and in Jesus I found a friend."

Immediately he began regular family worship. But his worldly friends taunted him now, as before he had often taunted other Christians. "How do you know the Bible is the Word of God?" they teased. "What about its contradictions?"

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"If the Bible is the Word of God," Miller responded staunchly, "then everything it contains can be understood, and all its parts made to harmonize. Give me time, and I'll harmonize its apparent contradictions or I'll be a Deist still."

Laying aside every book except the Bible itself and Cruden's Concordance, he began with the first verse of Genesis 1 and advanced no more quickly than he could handle the problems that arose. Using the margin and the concordance, he let the Bible explain itself. One by one, most of its seemingly insoluble inconsistencies faded away.

Not only did He find a change of life, but he found that the prophecies of the Bible, one after another, had all been fulfilled to the letter. He became convinced that God indeed can foresee the future and can control the events of history, such as He did at Plattsburgh. As he continued to study he found that, just as God had predicted the past, so He has predicted the future. Some of the prophecies that especially moved William Miller were the prophecies about a coming "judgment," in which "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (2 Cor. 5:10).

Another text that struck home to his conscience was from the book of Revelation: "And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to Him; for the hour of His judgment is come: and worship Him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of water" (14:6, 7). He thought that this event must occur when "The Son of Man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him ... [and] shall sit upon the throne of His glory: And before Him shall be gathered all nations" (Matthew 25:31, 32).

As he realized that most people were not ready to face this judgment, nor even knew that such an event was to take place, he became convicted that he must tell others about what he had learned, and of how Jesus could save them from their sins and prepare them for this climactic event.

But though convicted, this he could not do! Not he! He may be able to read a sermon on Sunday, but to warn the world about a coming judgment was unthinkable. And yet the call persisted. For thirteen years Miller brushed the call aside, but during those years he was glued to his Bible. Whole nights he spent in study. But with every passing day the impression that he must share with others what he had learned persisted to grow stronger and more persistent. The call became almost unbearable. "I told the Lord," he later said, "I was diffident and had not the necessary qualifications."

He tried everything he could do to satisfy his burdened soul-everything, that is, except to preach those truths to others. But nothing could satisfy the persistent inner call to preach. The call kept ringing in his ears: "Go and tell it to the world."

One day, as he was reading his Bible, it was as though he heard a voice saying, "I have appointed you a watchman. Tell it to the world!"

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He looked up from the Bible he was reading, deeply troubled by the call of God. Or was it a call of God? He must know beyond a doubt. He pounded his fist on his desk. Stood up. Kneled down. And prayed, "No, God. No! Thou knowest that I cannot preach. I cannot preach.

"But perhaps it is Thy will for me to go," he argued with himself and with God.

"O Lord, I will enter into a covenant with You. If You will open the way; I mean, if You will send an invitation for me to preach, why, then, O God, I will go.

He settled into his chair at ease. "Now," he mused, "I shall have peace, for if I receive an invitation, I know that God will attend me. But it isn't very likely," and he smiled contentedly, "that anyone will ask a 55 year old farmer like myself to preach on the judgment at the end of time." William Miller had first felt the call to the ministry at age 42, but had stifled the conviction until now—surely no one would ask him to preach now. But within thirty minutes there was a loud knocking at the door.

"Who can that be, so excited on a Saturday morning?" he asked himself absentmindedly.

The knocking came again. "I had better go and see," he said to himself.

"Good morning to you, Uncle William," the boy at the door cried cheerily.

"Nephew Irving!" exclaimed Miller. "And what might you be doing sixteen miles from home so early in the morning?!"

"Uncle William, I left before breakfast to tell you that our Baptist minister in Dresden is unable to speak at services tomorrow. Father sent me to make a request of you. He wants you to come and talk to us about the things you have been studying in the Bible. Will you come?"

Miller turned on his heel without a word, stormed out through the kitchen door, stumbled into a maple grove that stood nearby, and wrestled with the Lord. He was angry with himself, angry with God, and very much afraid.

For a solid hour he pleaded to be released from his pledge. "O my God, send someone else, I pray!"

Even as a Deist he had kept his word. As a Christian could he do any less? After anguished tears, he gave in to God at last.

Then what a feeling overcame him! Thirteen years of reluctance overcome! The joy of surrender! "Glory to His name!" he exclaimed, as a flood of peace and joy flooded his soul.

Immediately after lunch Miller was on his way with his nephew to Dresden, several hours away. So inspiring was his discourse the next Sunday morning that the townspeople asked him to stay and preach every night that week. By the end of the week, over a dozen entire families had accepted Jesus as their Savior.

Over the next several years William Miller spoke to over a half-million people. As he himself had been converted from Deism, he was able to reach many other Deists and Atheists. It is estimated that over 3,000 Atheists accepted Christ as their Savior as the result of William Miller preaching on the prophecies of the last days!

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Prophecy is one of the proofs that the Bible gives that it is inspired. God says: "Remember ... I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done" (Isaiah 46:9, 10).

There were several things that lead William Miller to accept the Bible as the inspired Word of God:

- 1) He felt the presence of the Holy Spirit working upon his heart.
- 2) He witnessed and recognized the providential acts of God.
- 3) He saw that Jesus was the answer to man's needs.
- 4) He found that the prophecies in the Bible were all true, showing that *God can foretell the future.*



### The Anvil of God's Word

*Last Eve I paused beside a blacksmith's door  
And heard the anvil ring the vesper chime;  
Then looking in, I saw upon the floor,  
Old hammers worn with beating years of time.*

*"How many anvils have you had," said I,  
"To wear and batter all these hammers so?"  
"Just one," said he, and then with a twinkling eye,  
"The anvil wears the hammers out, you know."*

*"And so," I thought, "The Anvil of God's Word,  
For ages skeptic blows have beat upon,  
Yet though the noise of falling blows was heard,  
The anvil is unchanged, the hammers gone."*

*John Clifford.*

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