

These tracts are classics of Gospel Truth that readers of J. C. Ryle have come to expect from all his writings. His tracts are “pure gold.” Many of these tracts, not published since the 19th century, have come into my possession, and I offer you some of these inspiring works exactly word for word as they were first published by Drummond’s Tract Depot, Stirling, Scotland.

## “WHAT CANST THOU KNOW?”

“Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than hell; what canst thou know ?

— JOB xi. 7, 8.

THESE striking words came from the lips of Zophar the Naamathite, one of the three friends who came to comfort the patriarch Job in his affliction. Those worthy men, no doubt, meant well; and their sympathy is deserving of all praise in a cold and unfeeling world. But they completely misunderstood the case before them, and so proved “physicians of no value.” They only irritated the poor sufferer, and added to his troubles. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that they said many wise and excellent things, and of these the passage which heads this paper is one.

The verses before us contain four weighty questions. Two of them we certainly cannot answer, but two we can. A little brief discussion of the whole subject to which the text points appears suitable to the times in which we live.

Our lot is cast in a day when a wave of unbelief is passing over the world, like a wave of fever, cholera, diphtheria, or plague. It is vain to deny it. Every intelligent observer of the times knows that it is so. I do not say for a moment that the advance of science necessarily makes men unbelievers. Nothing is further from my thoughts. I welcomed the visit of the British Association to Southport in the diocese of Liverpool, Lancashire, and I am thankful for every addition to our knowledge which its leaders annually announce. I doubt whether formal, organized, systematic, reasoning infidelity is so common as many suppose. But I do say that there is in the air of these times a disposition to question everything in revealed religion, and to suspect that science and revelation cannot be reconciled. The faith of many church-goers and professing Christians seems cold, and languid, and torpid. They are continually harping on petty modern objections to Scripture.—“Are such and such things in the Bible really quite true? Do not some clever and learned people say we should not believe them?” This is the kind of mischievous talk which is often heard in many quarters. To supply some simple antidotes to this sceptical spirit, to show the unreasonableness of it, to nerve and invigorate the Christian, to make him see the strength of his position, to help him to get rid of a doubting spirit, and to enable him to grasp his old creed more tightly than ever—these are the objects I have in view in this paper.

I. First, and foremost, a wise Christian ought always to admit that *there are many things in Bible religion which of necessity we cannot fully understand*. The Book of Revelation, the Book of God, contains much which, like God Himself, we cannot “find out to perfection.”

The catalogue of these hard things is not a small one, and I shall only supply a few leading instances. I will mention the Mosaic account of creation,—the fall and entrance of sin into the world,—the doctrine of the Trinity,—the incarnation of Christ,—the atonement for sin made by Christ’s death,—the personality and work of the Holy Spirit,—the inspiration of Scripture,—the

reality of miracles,—the use and efficacy of prayer,—the precise nature of the future state,—the resurrection of the body after death—each and all of these subjects, I say, contains much that we cannot fully explain, because it is above the reach of our faculties. No Christian of common sense, I believe, would pretend to deny it. The humblest child could ask questions about each of them which the wisest theologian in Christendom could never answer.

But what of it? Does it follow that we care to believe *nothing* about a subject, and to reject it altogether, because we do not understand everything about it? Is this fair and reasonable? Is this the way that we deal with our children when we require them to begin the study of mathematics, or any other branch of education? Do we allow our boys to say, “I will learn nothing till I understand everything?” Do we not require them to take many things on trust, and to begin by simply believing? “I speak as to wise men, judge ye what I say.”

The plain truth is that to refuse to believe Christian doctrines because they are *above* our reason, and we cannot fully understand them, is only one among many proofs of man’s natural pride and arrogance. We are all, at our best, poor, weak, defective creatures. Our power of grasping any subject, and seeing all round it, is extremely small. Our education rarely goes on for more than twenty years, and is often very shallow and superficial. After twenty-five most of us add little to our knowledge. We plunge into some profession in which we have little time for thought or reading, and are absorbed and distracted by the business and cares of life. By the time we are seventy, our memories and intellects begin to fail, and in a few years we are carried to our graves and see corruption. And is it likely, or probable, or reasonable to suppose that such a creature as this can ever understand perfectly the Eternal and Almighty God, or the communications that God has made to man? Is it not rather certain that there will be many things about God and revelation that he cannot, from his very nature, comprehend. I will not insult my readers by asking for a reply. I assert, without hesitation, that no Christian ever need be ashamed of admitting that there are many things in revealed religion which he does not fully understand, and does not pretend to explain. Yet he believes them fully, and lives in this belief.

After all, when a Christian meets one of those few men of science who profess to believe nothing in religion which he cannot fully *understand*, he would do well to ask him a simple question. Has he ever investigated the facts and doctrines of the Bible, which he says are incredible, with the same careful pains which he exercises when he uses his microscope, his telescope, his spectroscope, his dissecting knife, or his chemical apparatus? I doubt it extremely. I venture to believe that if some scientific infidels would examine the Book of God with the same reverent analysis with which they daily examine the Book of Nature, they would find that the things “hard to be understood” are not so many and inscrutable as they now suppose, and that the things plain and easy are a wide field which richly repays cultivation. That we “cannot find out the Almighty to perfection” let us always admit. But let us never admit that we can find out nothing, and are justified in neglecting Him.

II. The second point which I wish to bring forward is this. A wise Christian ought always to remember *that there are countless things in the material world around us which we do not fully understand*. There are deep things in the Book of Nature as well as in the Bible. Its pages contain hard knots and mysteries as well as the pages of the Book of God. In short, science contains its hard things as well as faith.

I am quite sure that the wisest and most learned men of science would be the most ready to admit the truth of what I have just said. If anything has specially characterized them in every age, it has been their deep humility. The

more they have known the more they have confessed the limited extent of their knowledge. The memorable language which Sir Isaac Newton is said to have used towards the end of his life ought never to be forgotten:—"I have been nothing more than a little child who has picked up a few shells and pebbles on the shore of the ocean of truth."

How little, to begin with, do we know about the heaven over our heads, or the earth under our feet! The sun, the moon, the planets, the fixed stars, the comets, can all supply deep questions which the wisest astronomers cannot answer. Yet, for all this, who but a fool would despise the work of Newton, and Halley, and Herschel, and Arago, and Airey? The age of the globe on which we live, the date and cause of the various convulsions it has gone through, long before man was created, the duration of the periods between each change of climate and temperature, what wise geologists will dare to speak positively of such subjects as these? They may speculate, and guess, and propound theories. But how often their conclusions have been overthrown! Yet who would dare to say that Buckland, and Sedgwick, and Phillips, and Lyell, and Murchison, and Owen had written nothing worth notice?

How little can we account for the action of some deadly poisons, and especially in the case of snake bites, and hydrophobia! The virus of a mad dog's bite will often remain dormant in the system for months, and then become active, and defy all medical treatment. But no one can explain what that virus is. The deaths caused by snake-bites in India are reported to be about 20,000 a year. Yet to this day the precise nature of the cobra's venom has baffled all chemical analysis, and once received into the human body, the most skilful doctors find they cannot prevent that venom causing death. But what man in his senses would conclude that chemistry and medicine are unworthy of respect, and that Liebig, and Fresenius, or Hervey, and Hunter, and Jenner, and Watson, have conferred no benefit on the world?

How little can men of science account for all the phenomena of light, heat, electricity, magnetism, and chemical action! How many problems lie under the words, "matter, force, energy," which no one has solved! Far be it from me to disparage the extra ordinary advances which physical science has made in this generation. But I am quite certain that its leading students, from Faraday downwards, will confess that there are many things which they cannot explain.

How little do we know about earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, hurricanes, and epidemics ! They come suddenly, like the recent awful catastrophes at Ischia and Java, or the historic events at Pompeii and Lisbon. They cause immense destruction of life and property. But why they come when they do come, and what laws regulate them, so that the inhabitants of a country may be prepared for them, even in this enlightened nineteenth century, we are totally and entirely ignorant. We can only lay our hands on our mouths and be still.<sup>1</sup>

How little, to bring matters to a familiar point, how less than little, or nothing in reality, can we explain the connection between our minds and bodies. Who can tell me why a sense of shame makes the little child's face turn red, or a sense of fear makes the same face turn pale? Who can tell me how my will affects my members, and what it is that makes me walk, or move, or lift my hand whenever I wish? Nobody ever did explain it, and nobody ever will. It is one of the many things that baffle all inquiry.

Now what shall we say to the facts I have adduced? That they are facts I am sure no man of common-sense will deny. If I were to say to a man of science, "I do not believe any of your conclusions, because there are many hard things in the Book of Nature which you cannot explain," I should be acting very foolishly. I shall do nothing of the kind. I have not the slightest sympathy with those weak-kneed Christians, who seem to think that science and religion can never harmonize, and that they must always scowl and look askance

at one another, like two quarrelsome dogs. On the contrary, I shall always hail the annual discoveries of physical science with a hearty welcome. For the continual progress of its students by experiment and observation, and for their annual accumulation of facts, I am deeply thankful. I am not the least afraid that science will ever finally contradict Christian theology (though it may appear to do so for a season), if students of science will only be logical. I only fear that, in their zeal, they are sometimes apt to forget that it is most illogical to draw a general conclusion from a particular premise,—to build houses of theories without foundations. I am firmly convinced that the words of God's mouth, and the works of God's hands, will never be found really to contradict one another. When they appear to do so, I am content to wait. Time will untie the knot.

I do not forget that some young philosophers are fond of talking of the "Laws of Nature," and of saying that they cannot reconcile them with the Bible. They tell us that these "laws" are unchangeable, and that the miracles and supernatural parts of Revelation, which seem to contradict the laws of nature, are therefore incredible. But these philosophers would do well to remember that it is not at all certain that we know all the Laws of Nature, and that higher, and deeper Laws may not yet be discovered. At any rate they must own that some of the existing "Laws" were not known and received three or four centuries ago. But surely, if that is the case, we may fairly assume that many other "Laws" may yet be found out, and that many problems which we cannot solve now will be solved hereafter.<sup>2</sup>

Two things, however, I must say, before leaving this part of my paper.

(a) On the one side, I appeal to those few men of science who turn away from Christianity, and refuse to believe, because of the hard things which its creed requires them to believe. I ask them whether this is just and fair. We do not turn away from physical science because it contains many things which they themselves admit they cannot explain. On the contrary, we bid them God speed, and wish success to their researches and investigations. But in return we ask them to deal honestly with Christianity. We admit that it contains difficulties, like physical science; but we cannot allow that this is any reason why it should be rejected altogether.

(b) On the other side, I appeal to those timid Christians whose faith is shaken by the attacks which men of science sometimes make on their creed, and are ready to throw down their arms and run away. I ask them whether this is not weak, and cowardly, and foolish? I bid them remember that the difficulties of the sceptical man of science are just as great as those of the Christian. I entreat them to stand firm and not be afraid. Let us frankly admit that there are deep things and "hard to be understood" in our creed. But let us steadily maintain that this is no proof that it is not true and not worthy of all acceptance.

III. The third and last point to which I shall ask the attention of my readers is this. *While it is true that we cannot find out the Almighty to perfection, it is not true to say that we can find out nothing at all in religion.* On the contrary, we know many things which are enough to make unbelief and agnosticism inexcusable.

What, then, do we know? Let me mention a few facts which no intelligent person can pretend to deny.

(a) We find ourselves living in a world full of sorrow, pain, strife, and wickedness, which no advance of science, learning, or civilization, is able to prevent. We see around us daily proof that we are all, one after another, going out of this world to the grave. Humbling as the thought is, we are all dying daily, and these bodies, which we take such pains to feed, and clothe, and

comfort, must see corruption. It is the same all over the globe. Death comes to all men and women alike, of every name, and nation, and people, and tongue; and neither rank, nor riches, nor intellect, can grant exemption. Dust we are, and to dust we return. At any rate we know this.

(b) We find, moreover, that all over the world the vast majority of mankind have a settled, rooted, in ward feeling, that this life is not all, that there is a future state, and an existence beyond the grave. The absence of this feeling is the exception. There it is. Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Hindustan, China, Mexico, and the darkest heathen tribes, as a general rule, are agreed on this point, however strange and diverse their ideas of God, and religion, and the soul. Will any one tell me that we do not know this?

(c) We find, moreover, that the only thing which has ever enabled men and women to look forward to the future without fear, and has given them peace in life, and hope in death, is that religion which Jesus Christ brought into the world nearly nineteen hundred years ago, and of which Christ Himself is the sun, and centre, and root, and foundation. Christ, I say emphatically,—Christ and His Divinity,—Christ and His atoning death,—Christ and His resurrection,—Christ and His life in heaven. Yes ! that very religion of Christ which some tell us they cannot receive because of the mysteries and difficulties of its creed, has made the deepest moral mark on mankind that has been made since man was created. Nothing called religion, whether Classic heathenism, or Buddhism, or Confucianism, or Mahometanism, has ever produced effects on consciences and conduct, which can bear comparison for a moment with the effects produced by Christianity. The changes which have taken place in the state of the world before. Christ and the world after Christ, and the difference at this day between those parts of the globe where the Bible is read, and those where it is not known, are great patent facts which have never been explained away. The holiest lives and the happiest deaths which have been seen on the earth for eighteen centuries have been the result of the supernatural theology of the Bible, of faith in and of obedience to Christ, and the story of the cross. I challenge any one to deny this.

(d) We find, above all, that the Historic Founder of Christianity, Jesus Christ Himself, is a great fact which has been before the world for eighteen centuries, and has completely baffled all the efforts of infidels and non-Christians to explain it away. No sceptical writer has ever given a satisfactory answer to the question “Who was Christ? Whence did He come?” The super-human purity of His life, confessed even by men like Rousseau and Napoleon<sup>3</sup>—the super-human wisdom of His teaching,—the super-human mystery of His death,—the inexplicable incident of His resurrection,—the undeniable influence which His apostles obtained for His doctrines, without the aid of money or arms,—all these are simple matters of history, and demand the attention of every honest man who really wishes to inquire into the great subject of religion. They are indisputable facts in the annals of the world. Let those who dare deny them.

Now what shall we say to these facts? That they are facts I think no one of average intelligence can possibly deny. I assert that they form a mass of evidence in favour of Christianity which cannot be safely neglected by any honest mind. “What canst thou know?” says Zophar. I answer, we know enough to justify every Christian in resting his soul calmly and confidently on the revelation which God has given us of Himself, and of Christ, in His Bible. That revelation is supported by such an enormous mass of probable evidence that we may safely trust its truth. I answer, furthermore, that we “know” enough to warrant us in urging every sceptic to consider seriously, as a prudent man, whether he is not occupying a very dangerous and untenable position. Probabilities are all against him; and probabilities, in the vast majority of things,

are the only guide of choice and action. He cannot say that the witness of eighteen centuries is so weak and worthless that it deserves no attention. On the contrary, it is so strong that, if he cannot explain it away, he ought either to throw down the arms of his unbelief, or to avow that he is not open to reason. In a word, he is not willing to be convinced. He has shut his eyes, and is determined not to open them. Well might our Lord say, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Well might He "marvel at unbelief" (Luke xvi. 31. Mark vi. 6).

I shall now conclude this paper with two general remarks which I commend to the attention of all who read it.

1. For one thing, let me try to show *the true causes of* a vast amount of the unbelief of the present day.

That there is a good deal of unbelief in this age it is vain to deny. The number of people who attend no place of worship, and seem to have no religion, is very considerable. A vague kind of scepticism or agnosticism is one of the commonest spiritual diseases in this generation. It meets us at every turn, and crops up in every company. Like the Egyptian plague of frogs, it makes its way into every family and home, and there seems no keeping it out. Among high and low, and rich and poor, in town and country, in Universities and manufacturing towns, in castles and in cottages, you will continually find some form of unbelief. It is no longer a pestilence that walketh in darkness, but a destruction that wasteth at noon day. It is even considered clever and intellectual, and a mark of a thoughtful mind. Society seems leavened with it. He that avows his belief of *everything* contained in the Bible must make up his mind in many companies to be smiled at contemptuously, and thought an ignorant and weak man.

(a) Now there is no doubt that, as I have already said, the seat of unbelief in some persons is *the head*. They refuse to accept anything which they cannot understand, or which seems above their reason. Inspiration, Miracles, the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Holy Spirit, the Resurrection, the Future State, all these mighty verities are viewed with cold indifference as disputable points, if not absolutely rejected. "Can we entirely explain them? Can we satisfy their reasoning faculties about them?" If not they must be excused if they stand in doubt. What they cannot fully understand, they tell us they cannot fully believe, and so they never observe the Sabbath, and never exhibit any religion while they live, though, strangely enough, they like to be buried with religious forms when they die.

(b) But while I admit this, I am equally certain that with some the real seat of unbelief is *the heart*. They love the sins and habits of life which the Bible condemns, and are determined not to give them up. They take refuge from an uneasy conscience by trying to persuade themselves that the old Book is not true. The measure of their creed is their affection. Whatever condemns their natural inclinations, they refuse to believe. The famous Lord Rochester, once a profligate and an infidel, but at last a true penitent, is recorded to have said to Bishop Burnet, as he drew near his end, "It is not reason, but a bad life, which is the great argument against the Bible." A true and weighty saying! Many, I am persuaded, profess that they do not believe, because they know, if they did believe, they must give up their favourite sins.

(c) Last, but not least, with far the greater number of people the seat of unbelief is a lazy, indolent *will*. They dislike all kind of trouble. Why should they deny themselves, and take pains about Bible-reading and praying, and Sabbath observance, and diligent watchfulness over thoughts, and words, and actions, when, after all, it is not quite certain that the Bible is true? This, I have little doubt, is the form of unbelief which prevails most frequently among young people. They are not agitated by intellectual difficulties. They are of-

ten not the slaves of any special lusts or passions, and live tolerably decent lives. But deep down in their hearts there is a disinclination to make up their minds, and to be decided about anything in religion. And so they drift down the stream of life like dead fish, and float helplessly on, and are tossed to and fro, hardly knowing what they believe. And while they would shrink from telling you they are not Christians, they are without any backbone in their Christianity.

Now, whether head, or heart, or will, be in fault, it is some comfort to remember that there is probably less of real, downright, reasoning unbelief than there appears to be. Thousands, we may be sure, do not in their heart of hearts believe all that they say with their lips. Many a sceptical saying is nothing more than a borrowed article, picked up and retailed by him who says it, because it sounds clever, while, in reality, it is not the language of his inner man.

Sorrow, and sickness, and affliction, often bring out the strange fact that so-called sceptics are not sceptics at all, and that many *talk* scepticism merely from a desire to seem clever, and to win the temporary applause of clever men. That there is an immense amount of unbelief in the present day I make no question; but that much of it is mere show and pretence is, to my mind, as clear as noonday. No man, I think, can do pastoral work, and come to close quarters with souls, visit the sick, and attend the dying, without coming to that conclusion.

The parting advice I offer to heart sceptics is simply this. Let me entreat you to *deal honestly with your soul about secret sins*. Are you sure there is not some bad habit, or lust, or passion, which, almost insensibly to yourself, you would like to indulge, if it were not for some remaining scruples? Are you quite sure that your doubts do not arise from a desire to get rid of restraint? You would like, if you could, to do something the Bible forbids, and you are looking about for reasons for disregarding the Bible. Oh! if this is the case with any of my readers, awake to a sense of your danger! Break the chains which are gradually closing round you. Pluck out the right eye, if need be; but never be the servant of sin. I repeat that the secret love of some vicious indulgence is the real beginning of a vast amount of infidelity.

The parting advice I offer to lazy sceptics is this. Let me entreat you to *deal honestly with your souls about the use of means for acquiring religious knowledge*. Can you lay your hand on your heart and say that you really take pains to find out what is truth? Do not be ashamed to pray for light. Do not be ashamed of reading some leading book about the Creeds and the Confession of your own Church, and, above all, do not be ashamed of regularly studying the text of your Bible. Thousands, I am persuaded, in this day, know nothing of the Holy Book which they affect to despise, and are utterly ignorant of the real nature of that Christianity which they pretend they cannot believe. Let not that be the case with you. That famous "honest doubt," which many say is better than "half the creeds," is a pretty thing to talk about. But I venture a strong suspicion that much of the scepticism of the present day, if sifted and analyzed, would be found to spring from utter ignorance of the primary evidences of Christianity

2. The other concluding remark which I will make is this. I will try to explain *the reason why so many professing Christians are continually frightened and shaken in their minds by doubts about the truth of Christianity*.

That this is the case of many I have a very strong impression. I suspect there are thousands of Sabbath-keeping, church-going Christians who would repudiate with indignation the charge of scepticism, and yet are constantly troubled about the truth of Christianity. Some new book, or lecture, or sermon, appears from the pen of men like Darwin or Colenso, and at once these worthy people are scared and panic stricken, and run from clergyman to cler-

gyman to pour out their anxieties and fears, as if the very ark of God was in danger. "Can these new ideas be really true?" they cry. "Must we really give up the Old Testament, and the flood, and the miracles, and the resurrection of Christ? Alas! alas! what shall we do?" In short, like Ahaz, their "hearts are moved, as the trees of the wood are moved with the wind" (Isaiah vii. 2).

Now what is the cause of this readiness to give way to doubts? Why are so many alarmed about the faith of eighteen centuries, and frightened out of their wits by attacks which no more shake the evidences of Christianity than the scratch of a pin shakes the great Pyramid of Egypt.

The reason is soon told. The answer lies in a nutshell. The greater part of modern Christians are utterly ignorant of the evidences of Christianity, and the enormous difficulties of infidelity. The education of the vast majority of people on these subjects is wretchedly meagre and superficial, or it is no education at all. Not one in a hundred church-goers, probably, has ever read a page of Leslie, or Leland, or Watson, or Butler, or Paley, or Chalmers, or M'Ilvaine, or Daniel Wilson, or Porteus, or Whately. What wonder if the minds of such people are like a city without walls, and utterly unable to resist the attacks of the most commonplace infidelity, much less of the refined and polished scepticism of these latter days.

The remedy for this state of things is patent and plain. Every professing Christian should arm his mind with some elementary knowledge of the evidences of revealed religion and the difficulties of infidelity, and so be ready to give a reason for the faith that he professes. He ought not merely to read and love his Bible, but to be able to tell any one why he believes the Bible to be true. Ministers should preach occasionally on evidences. It was one of that great man Cecil's counsels to a clergyman, "In your sermons never forget the infidel." Schools, Colleges, and Universities, which make any pretence to be Christian, should never altogether leave out evidences in their scheme of instruction for the young. In short, if we want the coming generation to hold fast Christianity, we must provide them with defensive armour.

With these two remarks I close my paper. Thank God! we travel on to a world where there is no ignorance, no scepticism, and no doubt. We shall soon see as we have been seen, and know as we have been known. Alas! What a waking up remains for many the moment the last breath is drawn! There is no unbelief in the grave. Voltaire now knows whether there is a sin-hating God; and David Hume now knows whether there is an endless hell. The infant of days, by merely dying, acquires a knowledge which the subtlest philosophers, while on earth, profess their inability to attain. The dead Hot-tentot knows more than the living Socrates. To that future world the true Christian may look forward calmly, confidently, and without fear. He that has Christ in his heart, and the Bible in his bead, is standing on a rock, and has no cause to be afraid. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, let us be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. xv. 58). If we cannot "find out the Almighty to perfection," we can know enough to give us peace in life, and hope in death. What we "know" let us hold fast.

One thing at least is certain. If we "*KNOW*" little we can *DO* much. Is it not written, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God."—"The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us, and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (John vii. 17; Deut. xxix. 29).



