

The Bristol Miracle

GEORGE MÜLLER THE MAN

George Müller was an ordinary man, but his undeniable faith, implicit trust and love for God has the same impact on the world today as when he died in 1898. This continues to be an inspiration and witness to all who commit their lives to God.

One of the many fascinating aspects of George Müller's life is that it illustrates very simply the power of God. There are those who find it difficult to accept the authenticity of much of the scriptures and view many of the remarkable stories with scepticism. George Müller received £1,500,000 in answer to prayer without ever needing to ask for funds. At present day prices, this would be well over £75,000,000. Had this happened two or three thousand years ago the same sceptics would, undoubtedly, have questioned its authenticity. As it happened in the latter part of the nineteenth century with modern records and factual evidence, the facts can be challenged but certainly not disputed.

What is perhaps even more remarkable is that it is the SAME TODAY. The George Müller Charitable Trust makes no appeals, yet through the same trust in God, money is received almost daily for the Homes, for the Elderly work and also for The Scriptural Knowledge Institution, which aids the work of missionaries world-wide.

George Müller was the faithful servant whom God used. This fact has an intriguing parallel with many Biblical characters.

GOD CHOOSES ALL TYPES

God often chose ordinary men, sometimes men with an inglorious and doubtful past, men who often mocked the faith and men with whom a great deal of patience was needed because of their reluctance to turn away from the 'good life'. George Müller had been all of these types.

George Müller was born in Kroppenstaedt, a Prussian village, on the 27th September 1805. The son of a Tax Collector, he did not become a Christian until he was twenty years of age. His father wanted him to enter the ministry but only so that he could retire to the ease of his son's manse. Despite kindness and generosity continually shown by his father, George Müller was an habitual thief, inveterate liar and indeed he later said there was almost no sin into which he had not fallen. He even had the audacity to become a confirmed member of the Lutheran Church and take Communion in spite of being well aware of his sinful ways.

George Müller's conversion was dramatic! Many of his sinful ways he relinquished at once and as understanding of the Christian way of life increased so he dedicated his life to Jesus Christ. When he came to England in 1829 he formed a friendship with a quiet, godly and scholarly Scotsman named Henry Craik. This became a life-long friendship and under God's guidance they formed a great spiritual partnership in the Gospel and in children's work.

Through the work of the Orphan Homes and the Scriptural Knowledge Institution, both of which Mr Müller founded, many responded to the gospel and heard the call to dedicate their lives to God. The work continues today on the same principles - and the witness to God's faithfulness is still used to the glory of God.

AN INSPIRATION

The most significant aspect of George Müller's 93 years on earth was his absolute obedience to the will of God. It is this example which inspired and continues to inspire men to know and exercise that faith which God requires of us all. The fact that the Spirit of God transformed a rebellious, sinful and self-determined young man to become such a man of God must surely give rise to hope for each one of us.

'Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord'.

George Müller trusted and his trust was never in vain.

THE WASTED YEARS

George Müller was born in 1805 and until his conversion to the Christian faith in 1825, there was, on his own admission, hardly a sin into which he had not fallen.

He had become an habitual thief, liar, gambler and a cheat, devising cunning and devious methods to fulfil his evil desires. Besides his immoral ways it was George Müller's need for alcoholic drink that caused many of his problems. Even when his mother lay dying he was found roaming the streets in a drunken state.

THE PRODIGAL SON

The similarities between George Müller's early life and the parable of the Prodigal Son are quite remarkable, a fact not unnoticed by many writers and commentators.

In 1810 George Müller moved with his family from that Prussian village of Kroppenstaedt to nearby Heimersleben, some four miles away. He and his brother received no real parental control and their father, being very generous, gave them plenty of money. They were encouraged to keep records of their spending, but that is where parental discipline and control ended.

George Müller regularly stole money from his father, invariably when collecting debts on his father's behalf by handing over much less than he had collected. His father often had to make up missing money and on one occasion a successfully laid trap caused George Müller to be punished, but he was unrepentant.

George Müller was sent to a classical school at Halberstaedt hoping to become a Lutheran clergyman. Despite being a brilliant pupil he continued his sinful ways. His stealing became more compulsive and on one occasion he managed to retain all but one twelfth of his confirmation fees which his father had given him for confirmation classes.

DECEIT, LIES AND PRISON

Once George Müller embarked upon a remarkable period of deceit and lies as he went from one hotel to another, often in the company of a woman, living a 'playboy' life, but with no money. After pawning valuable possessions and leaving his remaining belongings at one hotel as security, the law caught up with him and he ended up in prison. Even in prison George Müller told the most unbelievable lies to impress a fellow prisoner.

After a month in prison his father bailed him out, settled his debts and beat him. For a while George Müller tried to please his father and indeed, tried to change his ways. It was not long however, before he was in debt again and this time he concocted a story of having been robbed and was more than compensated by his sympathetic friends. Further, he managed to get some of his debts written off and payment of the remaining ones delayed. When his friends eventually discovered the truth this did not seriously concern him.

The last sinful escapade came when he was at Halle University studying theology. With three fellow students they forged papers and documents so that they could go on a vacation of worldly pleasure in Switzerland. George Müller even then managed to cheat his friends by having charge of the money and, through devious means, only paid two thirds of that paid by the others.

After the Swiss holiday one member of the party, Beta, who was an old friend and fellow student of George Müller, told him of a prayer meeting which he often attended. George Müller expressed a desire to go with him and it was that meeting which was to change his whole life.

'For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

It pleased God to teach George Müller something of that precious truth.

THE TURNING POINT

George Müller's conversion in November 1825 was dramatic and his whole direction, purpose and way of life changed immediately.

He was introduced to the prayer meeting by his friend Beta and upon arrival was greeted with 'Come as often as you please; house and heart are open to you.' This welcome touched George Müller very much. The singing of hymns, study of the Bible and reading of a printed sermon made a deep impression and he felt this night he would find 'something' for which he had been searching all his life. The genuine love, great joy and deep humility in the hearts of the members of that group had a profound effect on George Müller but perhaps the turning point was when they all knelt to pray. He had never seen this before, let alone knelt to pray himself, and the whole meeting breathed such a spiritual atmosphere that he entered upon an entirely new experience! He was born again! No longer an idle and lazy character, but a disciple of the Living God.

Sometime later George Müller said about that evening, 'I understood something of the reason why the Lord Jesus died on the cross and suffered agonies in the Garden of Gethsemane; even that thus, bearing the punishment due to us, we might not have to bear it ourselves. And therefore, apprehending in some measure the love of Jesus for my soul, I was constrained to love Him in return.'

George Müller continued his theological studies at Halle University and within two months of his conversion to the Christian faith decided to become a missionary. This decision angered his father so much that he withdrew his son's financial support which left George Müller dependent on God alone.

A TEST OF FAITH

Without his father's allowance George Müller was penniless. Very shortly after committing the problem to God he was asked to teach German to visiting American professors and for this he was paid much more than he actually needed.

The greatest obstacle George Müller had to overcome was the acquisition of a passport to attend a missionary training school in London, because he was expected to serve his national service. After much prayer he went through with the signing up process for the Army and following a series of medicals he was discharged from active service for life as being medically unfit.

George Müller in 1829 made his way to London to train as a missionary to the Jews. After only a short time at the missionary training school he became seriously ill and nearly died. It was whilst recuperating in the Devon town of Teignmouth that George Müller's life was to take another change of direction.

PREACHING

George Müller met up with Henry Craik, a Scotsman who was to become his closest friend and it was this quiet, godly and learned man who taught George Müller the need to wholly trust in, and be obedient to, the will of God. After resigning from the Mission school to take up preaching engagements, George Müller eventually accepted the Pastorate of a Church in Teignmouth with an honorarium of £50 per annum. He felt that God would provide all his needs and that he should be wholly dependent upon Him. From that moment on, until his death in 1898, George Müller grew in obedience and trust in God for everything.

THE CHANGE OF DIRECTION

With the help of his very good friend Henry Craik, he gained a much greater understanding of the Scriptures and the will of God. During this period of learning in Teignmouth, George Müller realised that many preachers failed to communicate the truths of the Gospel message and tended to read printed sermons which were often apologetic, lacked conviction and inspiration. As George Müller began to preach God's Word in a straight, dynamic and forthright manner, he was continually encouraged by the response of many listeners and the increasing

number of conversions. Despite the growing response to his preaching there were many who reacted strongly against his direct approach, but somehow they seemed powerless to do anything about it, except listen.

THE MOVE TO BRISTOL

In 1830 George Müller married Mary Groves who became a true companion and support for the changing years which lay ahead. After two years he knew that his time in Teignmouth was coming to an end and although he was settled and very happy, he sensed that a move was imminent.

Henry Craik had already moved to Bristol and when he wrote to his best friend inviting him to make the same move, George Müller knew this call was from God. So in 1832 George and Mary Müller left the Devon town of Teignmouth for Bristol where God had a plan prepared for His now faithful servant.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE SCRIPTURAL KNOWLEDGE INSTITUTION

The Scriptural Knowledge Institution, or SKI, as it is known was founded on March 5th, 1834. George Müller laid down four main objectives, which are shown here. In addition, he felt that since this was of God, there would be no patronage, appeals or requests for subscription and that the Institution should never contract any debts. He was convinced that God would provide all resources and meet every need.

Within the first seven months £167 had been received and by May 1894 the figure had risen to half a million pounds. The institution still flourishes today with the same principles, although there are some changes to meet today's needs. Just over one hundred years later, in 1997, over three hundred thousand pounds was sent to missionaries working both at home and overseas for their support. Most of that money resulted from donations being channelled through SKI by individuals, Trusts, and churches.

The objects of SKI are expressed as follows:-

1. To assist Day-schools, Sunday-schools and Adult-schools, in which instruction is given upon Scriptural principles, and, as far as the Lord may graciously give the means and supply us with suitable teachers, to establish Schools of this kind.
2. To put the children of poor persons to such Day-schools, in order that they may be truly instructed in the ways of God, besides learning those things which are necessary for this life.
3. To circulate the Holy Scriptures.
4. To aid in supplying the wants of Missionaries and Missionary Schools.

Note. These objectives are as printed in a document entitled 'First Report of the Operations of the Scriptural Knowledge Society for Home and Abroad' and was signed by both George Müller and Henry Craik on the 7th October, 1834.

The Bethesda Chapel was the next pastoral ministry for George Müller. The large Chapel was run down and the congregation of six looked extremely small, but with a year's guarantee of rent George Müller committed the future needs of the church to God. The membership grew, financial support came and the Bethesda Chapel prospered both materially and spiritually.

Mary Müller had now given birth to daughter Lydia and it was at the time when Bristol was stricken with cholera. The effects of the cholera resulted in a death rate of high proportions, especially among the adults, and countless children became orphaned.

George Müller, as always, committed the whole problem to God and sought guidance as to what should be done.

PRAYER ANSWERED

He also prayed daily for individual conversions and prayed as long as fifty years for some people which illustrates his faith and trust in God. His own father was daily in his prayers and when the opportunity came to visit Heimersleben, George Müller was overjoyed. The re-union with father and brother was a happy one and George Müller's obvious love for God had a profound effect on his father. At the conclusion of the visit Herr Müller said to his son, 'May God help me to follow your example, and to act according to what you have said to me.'

In 1834 George Müller founded the Scriptural Knowledge Society. However, the worsening cholera epidemic and the ever increasing number of homeless children caused him to realise immediate action was required and in 1835 he called a public meeting with a view to opening an Orphan Home. This was a complete step in faith and four days before the meeting, God confirmed that step through the Scripture - 'Open wide your mouth and I will fill it' (Psalm 81 verse 10).

ORPHAN HOMES OPENED

George Müller asked God for £1,000 and the right people to run such a home. Within five months this had been provided. Mrs Müller, together with friends, began to furnish their own home in Wilson Street in the St Paul's area of Bristol, which was to accommodate thirty girls. The Orphan Homes became the fifth object of SKI.

A further three houses in Wilson Street were furnished, catering for a total of 130 children. When in 1845 this number had risen even further without additional premises, George Müller felt the need to erect a purpose built home to accommodate 300 children. This project required a massive sum of £10,000.

Once more George Müller's prayers were answered as the additional money was provided and he bought a rural site at Ashley Down, just outside the city's

boundary, well below the advertised asking price. In 1849 the first Home was opened accommodating 300 children.

By 1870 there was a total of five Houses at Ashley Down costing over £100,000 and housing more than 2,000 children. All the money and workers came as a direct result of prayer with no debts being incurred and no appeals or requests were ever made. There are many remarkable stories of the answers to prayer and the buildings and the work continue to be a testimony to His faithfulness and grace of God.

'Open wide your mouth and I will fill it.'

George Müller's total obedience was rewarded by the fulfilment of God's promise.

LIFE IN THE ORPHAN HOMES

When George Müller started the Children's Homes his primary objective was not the welfare of the children. His main concern was that it should be seen that God was providing all the needs as a result of prayer and faith, without anyone being asked or approached.

From the time George Müller started the first home in Wilson Street in 1836 with its 30 girls until the completion of the fifth Home at Ashley Down, bringing his total family to more than 2,000 he was faced with all manner of social problems. Disease was the greatest hazard, ranging from outbreaks of cholera to smallpox epidemics. Poor sanitary conditions, open sewers, unclean drinking water, rubbish piled in the street, no provision for removing the dead and no preventative measures against disease, caused a death rate of high proportions. Despite all this and a slow acting Government, George Müller managed through prayer and faith, to protect his 'large family' against such filth and degradation. Indeed the Müller orphans were more fortunate than most.

Although there were some children who did not enjoy life in the Homes, for many of them it became the means of their salvation. The alternative was little food, often no home and the meaning of life became a matter of survival. The future held little or no hope. George Müller provided, through God, hope, love and a family life with a sound Christian foundation.

All the children in the Homes were smartly dressed. The boys were given three suits and those nine years and above wore a smart navy-blue Eton Jacket, waistcoat and corduroy trousers together with a glazed peaked cap. The younger boys wore a blue shirt instead of the jacket and short cloaks were provided for bad weather conditions. The girls wore a navy blue cotton dress which was protected by a cloak, shawl or tippet according to the weather. All girls wore a straw coloured bonnet tied with an attractive band. The girls also had varying hairstyles according to age. For example, the older girls who were capable of doing their own hair were allowed to grow it to shoulder length or longer.

ABOVE THEIR STATION

The education policy which George Müller devised, was of a high standard and comprised a wide variety of subjects. He was often criticised for his high standard of education which was often described as 'above their station'. Only a few years earlier, Dr Andrew Bell had written in his book - 'An experiment in Education' - 'There was a risk of elevating by an indiscriminate education, the minds of those doomed to the drudgery of daily labour, above their condition and thereby rendering them discontented and unhappy with their lot.'

George Müller did not agree. In fact he employed a School Inspector to maintain the high standards. In 1885 the average percentage of all children in their annual examination based on six subjects was 91.1%. Because of the duration of the education provided by George Müller, he was accused of robbing factories, mills and mines of labour. He was not deterred however, and kept the boys until they were 14 and the girls until they were 17.

The children had other duties to perform. Boys learnt to knit and darn socks, make beds, clean shoes, scrub rooms, work in the garden and run errands. The girls helped in the kitchens, sculleries, wash houses and laundries.

Discipline at the Homes was strict but not harsh. Children who exerted an unacceptable influence on others, were expelled. The usual form of punishment was corporal which was an acceptable form of discipline in those days.

There was not a great deal of variation in the food but it was wholesome and regular. Porridge every morning for breakfast and meat for dinner on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays. On Tuesdays and Sundays a dish of rice and raisins was commonplace. On Saturdays they were served broth with meat in it. Meat was either mutton - known to the children as 'Og' or corned beef. The bread was known as 'Toke' because of the grace said at meals 'We thank thee, Lord, for these tokens of thy love!' Fresh fruit and eggs were in plentiful supply and milk and water was the usual drink.

Charles Dickens once visited the Orphanage upon hearing rumours of starvation. After inspection, he left wholly satisfied that the children were adequately fed. On special occasions such as George Müller's birthday they were each given cake and an enormous apple dumpling to mark the anniversary. Christmas was also an occasion for special food and one year 150 pheasants were received from a donor in Cornwall.

The annual outing to Purdown, a field within walking distance from the Orphanage, was a most popular event as was Christmas with its trees, decorations, presents, carols, games and parties.

The children were awakened at six in the morning and after breakfast at eight there was a Bible reading and a time of prayer.

The evening session often included an outside guest speaker.

No child left the Müller Homes until employment had been found for them. The boys were apprenticed to a trade and some with the ability to teacher training. They were always provided with three suits and a sum of money. The girls left at 17

and went into domestic service, nursing or teacher training, they too were provided with an outfit of clothes and some money. George Müller gave his blessing to every child on leaving his care, and gave to each a Bible.

As one orphan recalled upon leaving, 'My belongings were my Bible, my clothes and half a crown and, best of all, was the priceless blessing of George Müller's prayers.'

Despite George Müller's death in 1898 the Homes continued to operate in the same way with the same principles. There are many fine testimonies to the Müller Homes but a former Müller child, Edith Larby, sums up what many of the 18,000 children who have been through the Homes can testify,

'The greatest thing that has ever happened to me was at the Müller Homes because there I learnt about the Lord Jesus. Through the teaching that had been put into my heart as a child, I gave that same heart to the Lord one day, and I have never regretted it.'

200,000 MILES OF TRAVEL

In 1875, at the age of 70, the remarkable George Müller decided to devote the next period of his life to a world-wide ministry of preaching and teaching. Long before George Müller came to this decision, through much prayer, God had been preparing the way for this work. In February 1870 his wife Mary died in their fortieth year of marriage. Though Mary Müller had devoted her life to supporting George in the work at the Homes, she would not have had the physical strength for the vast amount of travel which lay ahead. George Müller's health had been robust for many years despite his earlier ill health.

Their daughter, Lydia, married James Wright, George Müller's assistant, in 1871. Together they became more involved in the work of the Homes which relieved him from much of the pressure and responsibility.

In 1872 George Müller married Miss Susannah Sanger - a 'consistent' Christian - as he once described her, whom he had known for twenty five years. Susannah loved travel and made an ideal companion on the tours ahead.

From 1875 to 1892 George Müller was almost constantly engaged on missionary preaching journeys. Throughout his Christian life he always set out his aims and objectives before embarking upon God's work and this new area was no exception. George Müller wanted to share with a wider audience the truths he had discovered about God. Further, he desired to encourage Christians to become lovers of the Bible and test everything by the Word of God. Another of his aims was to break down the barriers of denominationalism and to promote, as he put it, 'brotherly love amongst Christians.'

During his seventeen years of missionary travel he toured the United States of America three times, India twice and on three occasions toured Australia and the Colonies. In addition, George Müller preached in forty-two countries including China and Japan. By land and sea he travelled 200,000 miles, an extraordinary feat in the nineteenth century.

George Müller addressed meetings of up to 5,000 people at a time and was able to speak in English, French or German. In addition, his sermons were interpreted into as many as eighteen other languages. He estimated that during this seventeen year period he had addressed more than three million people.

George Müller still trusted God entirely for his every financial need. Often he had to pay sums of up to £240 for his long voyages yet no-one ever knew his needs. God provided for all of them.

Prayer was George Müller's answer to every problem, even when it came to influencing the forces of nature. In 1877 when the Müllers were aboard the ship 'Sardinian' bound for the United States, they ran into dense fog off the coast of Newfoundland, which severely slowed down their progress. George Müller told the Captain of his need to be in Quebec the following Saturday afternoon to which the Captain replied, "That is impossible." The Captain thought George Müller was mad when he suggested they should go to the chart-room and pray. When the Captain pointed out the density of the fog, George Müller replied, 'My eye is not on the density of the fog, but on the living God, who controls every circumstance of my life.' George Müller restrained the Captain from praying because he was not a believer but after he himself had prayed, invited the Captain to open the door. The fog had lifted. This story was subsequently re-told by the Captain himself, who had since become a Christian.

It was on that same trip the Müllers were invited to the White House to meet President and Mrs Hayes. During his 200,000 miles, spanning seventeen years, George Müller met many of the world's leaders and influential politicians.

George Müller ended his travels in 1892 in his eighty eighth year. It had now become apparent to him the importance of his second wife, Susannah. She had greatly assisted in the circulation of thousands of tracts in many different languages and had spoken privately to thousands of people about the Christian gospel. Within two years of the conclusion of the tours she died and George Müller was again a widower. Another four years and George Müller himself had died. His funeral procession brought much of Bristol to a standstill. Here was a great man of faith whose influence had been so evident in his adopted city of Bristol, but also a man whose work and life had been a challenge to countless people worldwide.