

William Miller

From a study presented by Andreas Dura, September 1, 2012

William Miller lead out in the Second Advent Awakening revival in America in the mid-1800's. This article shows how Miller's conversion and faith were built on a correct understanding of God's character, as just and merciful. This was the foundation upon which he engaged in the study of Bible prophecy, and it is the correct foundation for all who aspire to understand the prophetic word.

William Miller (1782-1849) was a very honest patriot. He lived in the United States, during the time of the War of 1812. This was still the era of the founding fathers.

Most of the founding fathers shared similar lines of thinking, and would have called themselves Deists. This meant that they believed in a higher Being who had somehow brought everything into existence, but they couldn't explain this higher Being, nor did they believe that He was directly involved with human beings down on earth. They thought that the Bible was just the recorded ideas of humans about that higher being, and therefore not inspired by the Holy Spirit.

William Miller wrote an autobiography, and these statements are from that work:

Apology and Defense, 1845

At the close of the war, I removed to my present residence in Low Hampton, N.Y.; and being retired from public life, in the busy scenes of which I had been engaged for ten years, I had more leisure for reading and reflection respecting another state. I could, however, find no assurance of happiness beyond the grave; all was dim and uncertain there.

Miller was thinking about a future life. He read a lot, even as a child; yet he could find nothing to satisfy his soul.

One day in May, 1816, I detected myself in the act of taking the name of God in vain, a habit I had acquired in the service; and I was instantly convicted of its sinfulness. I was then led to inquire how a just Being could consistently save those who should violate the laws of justice. The works of

Nature or of Providence, could give no answer to this question; and I was almost led to despair.

William Miller had discovered that there was something wrong in his life. He was doing something that he was convinced wasn't right. He asked himself, "How can a just Being consistently save those who do similar things?" The question here is regarding God's justice and mercy, how they fit together. He knew the teachings of many preachers of his time, who were constantly preaching that God forgives you and saves you from your sins. But it didn't seem possible to him for God to do that and yet be just and consistent at the same time.

The works of nature could give him no answer. What he calls the works of providence here refer to history, and William Miller had studied history. There too he could find no answer.

In this state of mind, I continued for some months, when suddenly the character of a Saviour was vividly impressed upon my mind.

He wasn't ignorant of the teaching of a Saviour, but it had never impressed him until now. The thought had never occurred to him that there might be something special about it.

It seemed that there might be a Being so good and compassionate as to himself atone for our transgressions, and thereby save us from suffering the penalty of sin. I immediately felt how lovely such a Being must be; and imagined that I could cast myself into the arms of, and trust in the mercy of such a One. But the question arose, How can it be proved that such a Being does exist? Aside from the Bible, I found that I could get no evidence of the existence of such a Saviour, or even of a future state. I felt that to believe in such a Saviour without evidence, would be visionary in the extreme.

Miller was truly in a dilemma. He did not believe that the Bible was inspired, yet it was the only book that offered a so-

lution.

Upon coming back from the war, Miller could find no assurance or happiness. In the war, he had seen many evil things. Soldiers always witness a lot of evil during war, even if they are on the supposedly *good* side. Horrible acts are committed on both sides, and people are generally disillusioned when they return. They go into war thinking that they are doing a good work, fighting for a righteous cause, but once they have entered the everyday business of war, they find that there is no justice on either side. They may deceive themselves into thinking they are in the right; but ultimately, in a war the real evil of human nature comes out. This is what William Miller saw, and therefore he could find neither peace nor happiness.

Looking upon all the injustice, he was disappointed and frustrated with the nature of humanity. He asked himself, "Where is justice?" He couldn't even find it in his own life! Then he came to the question: "Is there really such a thing as mercy, or forgiveness?" The only place he could find them was in a book which he did not believe to be inspired. This left him in great perplexity.

I saw that the Bible did bring to view just such a Saviour as I needed; and I was perplexed to find how an uninspired book should develop principles so perfectly adapted to the wants of a fallen world.

He saw that the Bible was just what he and others needed, and he was puzzled. You could ask the question the other way around: "Why are we so adapted to what is written in that book?" The two match. It's like a lock and key, which fit together perfectly. As a result of this realization, William Miller came to question his Deistic beliefs.

I was constrained to admit that the Scriptures must be a revelation from God; they became my delight, and in Jesus I found a friend.

What does constrained mean? The Bible uses the same word:

2 Corinthians 5

¹⁴ For the love of Christ constrains us...

This was Miller's experience. He saw the love of a Saviour, and it constrained him, leaving him with no other way out than to believe that the Bible must be an inspired book because he saw how precisely it was adapted to his need and the needs of others.

This is a very brief, comprehensive summary of Miller's experience in finding Christ. We can find more details in another statement, where he describes his childhood:

Memoir of William Miller, Miller's Works vol. 1, 1842, Part First

In my youth, between the years of seven and ten, I was often concerned about the welfare of my soul; particularly in relation to its future destiny.

Are children concerned about the welfare of their souls? They are. I remember that around that age, I thought a lot about death and wondered what would happen if I were to die.

I spent much time in trying to invent some plan, whereby I might please God, when brought into his immediate presence. Two ways suggested themselves to me, which I tried. One was, to be very good, to do nothing wrong, tell no lies, and obey my parents. But I found my resolutions were weak, and soon broken. The other was to sacrifice; by giving up the most cherished objects I possessed. But this also failed me; so that I was never settled and happy in mind, until I came to Jesus Christ.

Here, Miller describes himself trying very hard. There were two ways: either to perfectly obey all the laws he knew, or to sacrifice and give up everything he most cherished. But it didn't work; he found that he wasn't really giving up those most cherished objects, nor was he truly obeying. Next, he de-

scribes his experience as a Deist:

While I was a Deist, I believed in a God, but I could not, as I thought, believe the Bible was the word of God. The many contradictions, and inconsistencies, which I thought could be shown, made me suppose it to be a work of designing men, whose object was to enslave the mind of man; operate on their hopes and fears, with a view to aggrandize themselves.

William Miller did not know the Bible itself very well. He knew what he had heard as second-hand reports from others, and he read commentaries and critiques of the Bible; but he did not read the Bible itself. He thought it was enough just to read the pros and cons about the Bible, since he would see both sides. At the same time, he was an ardent student of history, and as he studied history in its details he was disappointed to see men being cruel and oppressive. This came out especially in the history of religion. He saw that religion was just a tool people used to empower themselves and oppress others, using the Bible as their justification. Naturally he didn't think very highly of that book.

The history of religion as it had been presented to the world, and particularly by the historians of the eighteenth century, was but a history of blood, tyranny, and oppression; in which the common people were the greatest sufferers. I viewed it as a system of craft, rather than of truth. Besides, the advocates of Christianity admitted that the Bible was so dark and intricate that no man could understand it.

First of all, the Bible was just an instrument of oppression. Second, nobody could even understand it. From the pulpit, preachers again and again claimed that passages in the Bible were dark mysteries of God. Naturally this was not an encouragement for Miller to study the Bible for himself. Why should he study something mystical that nobody understands?

This always was to me an inconsistent idea of God; and even made the Bible appear more like the oracles of the heathen gods, than like the wisdom of the just and righteous God...

One thing Miller definitely did believe in, and that was justice. He felt in his own heart that justice exists, that it was unjust for one person to oppress another. All of this could not be right. And as a person with a keen sense of justice, he revolted against the injustices he saw. If there was a higher Being, he believed that it must be a righteous Being. But the Bible? The Bible was just an invention of people in order to oppress others.

This always was to me an inconsistent idea of God; and even made the Bible appear more like the oracles of the heathen gods, than like the wisdom of the just and righteous God: To give us the Scriptures to teach us the way of eternal life, and at the same time clothe them in a mantle of mysticism, so that no man could understand them! Reveal his will, which we cannot understand, and then punish us for disobedience! How can such a being be called either wise or good?

That is cruel indeed—to tell us His will, in a way we cannot understand, and then punish us when we don't obey what we do not understand! That might be the way the heathen gods behaved, but how could the Christian God be like this, who was called a God of love?

These, and the like, were my arguments against the Bible. In the mean time, I continued my studies, storing my mind with historical knowledge. The more I read, the more dreadfully corrupt did the character of man appear. I could discern no bright spot in the history of the past. Those conquerors of the world, and heroes of history, were apparently but demons in human form. All the sorrow, suffering, and misery in the world, seemed to be increased in proportion to the power they obtained over their fellows.

That's how many people think today too. The more power a person obtains, the more he will abuse it. People might have good ideals originally, but as soon as they come to power, they will abuse their power. Communism is an apt example. The ideals behind the communistic revolutions were good, but as soon as its advocates came into power, they certainly

abused it. Thus it is with many revolutions. The conclusion we tend to draw is that the only safety is not to give someone too much power, so they cannot abuse it. This modern way of thinking is the product of the frustration here expressed by Miller.

But God does have power—infinite power, indeed. What does that mean? We'll continue to read:

I began to feel very distrustful of all men. In this state of mind I entered the service of my country. I fondly cherished the idea, that I should find one bright spot at least in the human character, as a star of hope: a love of country—PATRIOTISM. But two years in the service was enough to convince me that I was in an error in this thing also.

Patriotism, Miller thought, was finally something pure. Patriotism was something honest, something righteous. It meant fighting for freedom. And in this idea of freedom and patriotism, Miller saw a high ideal. But here too he was disappointed. He saw many injustices on the side he had formerly believed to be pure and righteous. It's like choosing a president because you think he will bring good and righteous ideals of freedom into office, but once the president starts ruling you discover that this isn't quite the case. You're disappointed—again.

When I left the service I had become completely disgusted with man's public character. I retired from the busy scenes of public life, in which I had been engaged about ten years; and thought to seek for that happiness, which had always eluded my pursuit in my former occupations, in the domestic circle. For a little space, a care and burden was taken off from my mind; but after a while I felt the need of some more active employment.

He had thought to retire and simply live a private life, but found that he couldn't simply live for himself and his family. He still had so much strength, and he wanted to go out and do something for others.

My life became too monotonous. I had lost all those pleasing prospects, which in youth I expected to enjoy in riper years. It appeared to me that there was nothing good on earth. Those things in which I expected to find some solid good had deceived me. I began to think man was no more than a brute, and the idea of hereafter was a dream; annihilation was a cold and chilling thought; and accountability was sure destruction to all.

He now began to ask, "What comes after death?"

The heavens were as brass over my head, and the earth as iron under my feet. ETERNITY! What was it? And death, why was it? The more I reasoned, the further I was from demonstration.

What we see here is a really despairing man. He looked for peace of mind; he looked for the truth; he looked for happiness, for relief from all the problems he saw. But the more he looked, the less he found, and the more he tried to comprehend the future, the more puzzled he became. He would have cried out, "O wretched man that I am!" (*Romans 7:24*).

The more I thought, the more scattered were my conclusions. I tried to stop thinking; but my thoughts would not be controlled.

His thoughts kept coming back, again and again, no matter how he tried to push them away. Have you ever experienced that? I was once convinced of something, but didn't want to think about it too much. I tried to rid myself of the thought, but it kept persecuting me until I opened the Bible and found a scripture that really gave an answer.

I was truly wretched; but did not understand the cause. I murmured and complained, but knew not of whom.

Whom shall I blame? If God is distant and has nothing to do with us, I cannot blame Him. I cannot blame my fellow men for my problems either.

I felt that there was a wrong, but knew not how, or where, to find the right. I mourned, but without hope. I continued in

this state of mind for some months; at length, when brought almost to despair, God by his Holy Spirit opened my eyes. I saw Jesus as a friend, and my only help, and the word of God as the perfect rule of duty.

The thought of Jesus as a friend came back to him. He had heard it from other people and read it in the Bible before, and now it returned to his mind.

Jesus Christ became to me the chiefest among ten thousand, and the Scriptures, which before were dark and contradictory, now became the lamp to my feet and light to my path. My mind became settled and satisfied. I found the Lord God to be a Rock in the midst of the ocean of life. The Bible now became my chief study; and I can truly say I searched it with great delight. I found the half was never told me. I wondered why I had not seen its beauty and glory before, and marvelled that I could ever have rejected it. I found everything revealed that my heart could desire, and a remedy for every disease of the soul. I lost all taste for other reading, and applied my heart to get wisdom from God.

In the next paragraph, he tells us that he put all the commentaries aside and read only the Bible. His attitude was changed completely.

We see here again that William Miller had found what perfectly met the needs of his soul. The key fit the lock. The lock was his heart and the word of God was the key, and it fit perfectly. Here was the Saviour he had been looking for.

That was quite an experience. How could a book, written so long ago, exactly fit that lock? If you produced a key today, how would you know that it would fit a lock thousands of years in the future? Would you dare to produce a key today for a lock so far ahead? You would feel almost certain that it wouldn't fit, unless there is someone who sees the future and guides you. And this is just what William Miller saw, and he was amazed that the key fit so well to his needs and those of the whole world.

Now the Bible became His chief study. He no longer read commentaries on it—just the Bible itself. It became the subject of his deepest interest, and he marveled that he could ever have rejected it. He also realized that the half had never been told him. Now he found what he had been looking for.

Let's draw some conclusions, some key points from this experience.

The main point in Miller's experience was the character of God. His main quest had been to discover what God is like. What kind of person is He, if He is a person? Who is He? As a child, Miller felt that this Being was demanding an obedience that he couldn't give. And when this is your relationship with someone, how do you view him? Favorably? Certainly not.

Here was a God of justice, but people could not deliver that justice. Miller didn't doubt God's justice. His problem was how to deal with such a Being when you couldn't deliver what was demanded. Later he wondered how this justice could be combined with mercy.

He also saw that religious history is full of incidents of abuse of power, and these cast negative reflections upon God. Such influences cause doubts about His character.

Additionally, the Bible was presented by religionists as an obscure book which you could not understand unless you had a commentary—but these contradicted themselves as well. This too placed God in a certain light. He was pictured as Someone who spoke in mysteries and then expected obedience to what He said.

All of this put God's character in question.

But eventually Miller concluded that these things could not be true. Such ideas of God defy logic as well as man's need. It also justifies the evil deeds of men even further. Ultimately, it leaves humankind in despair. This is what he clearly saw.

Therefore, these representations of God must be wrong.

They must be! And in the Bible he discovered a different God.

What little he knew about the Bible at first helped him see the love of the Saviour, which was the love of God. This began to open his eyes. He then turned to the Bible as a book from God, and he lost interest in all other reading. He also laid aside all commentaries on the Bible. Miller represented his view of God in the following verse:

Song of Solomon 5

¹⁰ My beloved is white and ruddy, the chiefest among ten thousand.

He began to see that God is the best, the very, very best.

When we consider Miller's experience and the happiness he received, we can see clearly what our destiny is as Christians and representatives of God's inspired Book. Our destiny is to show humankind that God is different from the representations of Him given by so many who claim to be His followers.

It is our destiny to show that in God justice and mercy are perfectly combined. It is also our destiny to reveal that all suffering in the world is the result of separation from God and misunderstanding His character.

Let me say it again: If we really believe that God is unjust and unrighteous, then we will feel justified in being unjust ourselves. If we believe that God lies, steals, and kills, then we will feel justified in doing the same. And this has been the problem all through the ages. People have believed the false representations of Him and felt justified in duplicating His supposed behavior in themselves. It is our destiny to reveal clearly that this is the cause of all suffering.

In a word, the cause of suffering can be stated as selfishness. When God is represented as and believed to be a selfish God, then those who ascribe to this view will feel justified in being selfish. And this is the cause of all suffering. It is our

destiny to give the people a different picture in our own lives.

In closing I would like to read a few statements from Ellen White's book on the life of Christ:

The Desire of Ages, p. 24

Satan represents God's law of love as a law of selfishness. He declares that it is impossible for us to obey its precepts. The fall of our first parents, with all the woe that has resulted, he charges upon the Creator, leading men to look upon God as the author of sin, and suffering, and death.

Jesus was to unveil this deception. As one of us He was to give an example of obedience. For this He took upon Himself our nature, and passed through our experiences. "In all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren." Hebrews 2:17. If we had to bear anything which Jesus did not endure, then upon this point Satan would represent the power of God as insufficient for us. Therefore Jesus was "in all points tempted like as we are." Hebrews 4:15. He endured every trial to which we are subject.

And He exercised in His own behalf no power that is not freely offered to us. As man, He met temptation, and overcame in the strength given Him from God. He says, "I delight to do Thy will, O My God: yea, Thy law is within My heart." Psalm 40:8. As He went about doing good, and healing all who were afflicted by Satan, He made plain to men the character of God's law and the nature of His service. His life testifies that it is possible for us also to obey the law of God.

From this we see clearly that Satan represents the law of God as a law of selfishness. That is what we find when we study history. But Jesus came into this world to reveal something else. Let's go back a couple of pages:

The Desire of Ages, p. 22

The earth was dark through misapprehension of God. That the gloomy shadows might be lightened, that the world might be brought back to God, Satan's deceptive power was to be broken. This could not be done by force. The exercise of force is contrary to the principles of God's government; He desires only the service of love; and love cannot be commanded; it cannot be won by force or authority. Only by love

is love awakened. To know God is to love Him; His character must be manifested in contrast to the character of Satan.

You could also say that the character of selflessness must be manifested in contrast to the character of selfishness.

This work only one Being in all the universe could do. Only He who knew the height and depth of the love of God could make it known. Upon the world's dark night the Sun of Righteousness must rise, "with healing in His wings."
Malachi 4:2.

We can clearly see from these two paragraphs that sin and suffering are the result of a wrong understanding of God's character. We can see this plainly in the life of William Miller. That was what puzzled and oppressed him.

The Desire of Ages, p. 22

The plan for our redemption was not an afterthought, a plan formulated after the fall of Adam. It was a revelation of "the mystery which hath been kept in silence through times eternal." Romans 16:25, R. V. It was an unfolding of the principles that from eternal ages have been the foundation of God's throne. From the beginning, God and Christ knew of the apostasy of Satan, and of the fall of man through the deceptive power of the apostate. God did not ordain that sin should exist, but He foresaw its existence, and made provision to meet the terrible emergency. So great was His love for the world, that He covenanted to give His only-begotten Son, "that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16.

This is the message of God for the world. It is a message that is to be confirmed in our own lives as we receive it as a key that fits a lock. When our lives show what true selflessness is, we will be a convincing power for truth in the world.

It is my desire that the Bible in our hearts will be a key to other hearts, so that honest seekers such as William Miller, people who are really in despair and are crying out, "O wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me?" will find that key.