

24<sup>th</sup> August

### Memory verse

Jesus saith unto him,

**I am the way, the truth, and the life:**

no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

John 14:6

In yesterday's lesson we looked at what “the way” means in this verse. Today we can consider “the truth”. Some people say that Jesus is a figment of the imagination, someone made up, like Father Christmas, but notice what Jesus himself said.

He [the Lord Jesus] did not say He knows the truth or that He merely teaches the truth (although He did), He said He IS the truth. He is the one who fulfilled all of the prophesies. (G. Fawcett)

“Truth is the property of being in accord with fact or reality”<sup>1</sup> says one dictionary. When Jesus says that he is the truth he is saying that he is reality, the opposite of what is false or illusion. Jesus is sometimes called “The Word” in the Bible. Jesus is the truth in living form. The Bible is the truth in written form. It is interesting to note that the Bible never calls the church “the truth”.

God's Word gives us absolute truth — things that never change. Once a university student was arguing about this with a gospel preacher. When the preacher stood up to leave the student's room, he casually picked up his stereo set and began to walk away with it. When the student became upset, the preacher replied, “Who are you to tell me that it is wrong to steal?” As a result the student's eyes were opened, and he realized that when his own possessions were involved, he did believe in absolute truth.<sup>2</sup>

That student went on to have faith in the Lord Jesus. Today's story is rooted in a difference of opinion over where we go to find the truth. The Catholic church taught that the church itself was the guardian and arbiter of truth. The Bohemian Brethren, followers of Jan Hus,<sup>3</sup> had discovered that the standard of truth was somewhere else altogether – just as our text says.

### The Blacksmith and the Bishops: The story of the flight from Poznań and what came afterwards

Back in February we had a lesson about the Schmalkaldic League.<sup>4</sup> February was a long time ago so you may want to go back and look at the lesson again to get the background to today's story. An atlas will help you to follow the long journey of Georg Israel and his friends. I have highlighted the names of the places for you to find. There are also some highlighted words you might like to look up in your dictionary.

In 1547 the Schmalkaldic War ended with a victory for the Catholics under Charles V at the battle of Mühlberg. As we read in the February lesson, after twenty-five years of freedom the Protestants were going to be once more forced into the Romish Church or face persecution.

Georg Israel (1505-1588) was a young blacksmith who was a pastor of the Bohemian Brethren. He had been a regular visitor to Martin Luther in Wittenberg and the two men got on well. Now his congregation had to flee. As church historian E. H. Broadbent explains:

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1 Merriam Webster Dictionary.

2 Bible Truth Publishers. <https://bibletruthpublishers.com/yp/?p=6682>

3 See the lesson for June 26<sup>th</sup>.

4 See lesson for 27<sup>th</sup> February.

At the battle of Mühlberg (1547) the Protestants were defeated, Ferdinand returned to Prague victorious, and began the intended **extirpation** of the Brethren. Four of the nobles were publicly executed in Prague, the possessions of others were confiscated, meetings were closed, and an order was issued that any who refused to join the Roman Catholic or Utraquist Church [a compromised church acknowledged by the authorities] must leave the country within six weeks. Then began a great emigration. From all sides the exiles, with their long trails of wagons, followed the roads leading towards Poland. The people on the way sympathized with the wanderers, let them pass **toll-free**, fed and entertained them.<sup>5</sup>

Georg himself decided to stay in **Prague** and he was given a choice: pay a fine of 1000 **ducats** or surrender yourself to the castle by a certain date. “Pay up and keep your freedom,” said his friends and they offered to gather together the money. “No!” said Georg. “I have been bought once and completely by Christ's blood. I do not need to be redeemed again with human gold. If you are going to collect money for me please just give it to me so that if I am exiled I will have money for my travels!”

So on the appointed day he went to the castle and gave himself up. He found himself put in prison. But he was not there for long before he saw a way to escape. He wrote to his Christian friend Sionius for advice, “Should I do it?”

“Yes!” came the reply and so, dressed up as a scribe with a pen behind his ear and carrying paper and an inkwell he passed the guards in broad daylight and made his way to freedom.

Behind him in his cell he left a letter to the castle governor and a copy of the 1535 *Confession of the Brethren*, a document consisting of 20 **clauses** beginning (after a preface by Martin Luther himself) with these magnificent words about where truth is to be found:

First, we all with **unanimous consent** teach the Holy Scriptures... as unshakably and most certainly true. These Scriptures are to have preference over any other writings, as the sacred is to be preferred over the **profane** and the divine over the human. They are to be believed absolutely and simply, and indeed the **dogmas** of truth through which people are instructed and formed through faith for salvation and righteousness are to be sought and derived from them.

Can you imagine what the authorities must have felt when they read that!

Blacksmith Georg was able to rejoin his fellow believers who had been given refuge by Count Andrew of Gorka (1520-1583), governor of the castle of **Poznań** and Governor-General of Greater Poland. Some 900 of the Bohemian refugees in 120 wagons sheltered here in his domains and began to set up home. You can see what Poznań looks like today in the picture.



Local people began to attend the church services held by the Bohemians and some were converted.

How wonderful! The gospel was being spread even through the trials of the Bohemian Brethren. But Georg's troubles were not over.



The Catholic bishop of Poznań, Benedykt Izdbieński, was not happy. In the picture you can see his marble

5 E H Broadbent, *The Pilgrim Church* (1931)

tomb in Poznań Cathedral.<sup>6</sup> The Latin inscription below it (not shown) says he was “a defender and keen champion of the church” and no doubt he was upset. It was bad enough that these Czech Protestants had come to Poznań but they were leading his own people astray as well! He went to the king of Poland, Sigismund II August, who was generally somewhat tolerant of Protestants, and persuaded him to order the Czech Brethren to leave by August 24<sup>th</sup> 1548.

The unhappy day arrived. Picture the people piling their belongings back into their carts. Do you think the children were sad to say goodbye to the friends they had made in their new home? The long train of wagons rolled off again on its way. Would they ever find a safe home?

But not everyone they had met in Poznań was left behind. Some of the converts from Poznań went with them! Like Ruth in the Bible (Ruth 1:16), they did not want to go back to their old ways so they decided to find a new home with those who had brought them the truth.

They arrived at Toruń over 100 miles away. I do not know how long the journey took them or how they managed for food and lodging. Perhaps they carried everything they needed in their carts. When they got to Toruń they held their services in ordinary houses. Once more there were conversions among the citizens of their new home. Once more they were spreading the gospel... and once more there was opposition.

The Catholic bishop here was Samuel Macziejovius, Chancellor to the Bishop of Kraków. He had a reputation for being mild in his treatment of those who disagreed with the Catholic religion. He had an energetic dispute with Georg. “By what authority,” he asked Georg, “do you claim to be a church leader? You are just a blacksmith! I am a bishop because I have my ordination from the hands of a bishop – who had his ordination at the hands of a bishop and so on back to the apostles themselves. But you! Who has ordained you?”

“I have my ordination from my Heavenly Father,” said Georg, “because he alone appoints his servants – all who teach the truth and fulfil the conditions laid down in the Scripture.”

Mild or not, Samuel Macziejovius did not want Georg and his friends to be in Toruń teaching that the Bible and not the Catholic church was the authority by which men should find the truth and live. Do you see how this fits in with today's memory verse? Jesus Christ is the truth. The Bible is the Word of God in written form. We do not need to rely on church officials to tell us what the truth is, we can read it for ourselves.

So another Royal edict was sought and the wagons had to roll onward again. But what about the new converts? Did they too go with their new friends? I do not know if any of them did but those who stayed behind now had a helper. For one of the brothers stayed behind in Toruń, despite the edict, to teach the truth from God's Word to the new converts and to help them witness to their neighbours. He must have been a brave man and I am sure God took care of him.

Northwards and northwards went the wagons until they reached the lands of the Archduke Albrecht of Prussia. His face looks stern under his enormous hat doesn't it? But here at last they had reached the land of safety. The Archduke was himself a friend of Luther's. He was a hymn-writer too and you will find his lovely hymn “The Will of God is Always Best” in today's Optional Resources files. If you are following the journey on a map look for the city of Kaliningrad. Nowadays this is part of Russia but when the Archduke Albrecht ruled it was called Königsberg and was the capital of Prussia.



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6 Image: Scotch Mist, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons

The Archduke called Georg and some of his friends before the local ministers. They questioned Blacksmith Georg and the others closely. The Prussians wanted to be sure that everything these people believed was from God's Word. They too wanted to be sure that these men would not be leading people astray. But how different these Prussian ministers were from Benedykt Izdbieński and Samuel Macziejovius! I am sure as they listened to Georg's answers to their questions they knew at once that here were fellow believers. For the Archduke's ministers compared what Georg and his friends said with what God has said in the Bible. They all agreed that the Bible alone was the standard of truth. This was the fundamental difference between them and Benedykt and Samuel. Benedykt and Samuel thought the church – their church of course – was the standard of truth, not the Bible. That is why it was so important to them that they thought they could trace their succession back from bishop to bishop to the apostles themselves. This was what they trusted in for their authority, not the Bible. In reality there were many broken links in that supposed chain but even if there were no broken links this physical line does not lead us to the truth. Jesus is the Truth, the Word, and everything he has to tell us is found in the Bible.

The refugees settled down in Prussia but Blacksmith Georg's adventures were not over. He was sent out as a travelling preacher along with a friend, Matthias Czervenka, to Moravia, in the south east part of the modern **Czech Republic**. To reach this area they travelled through Poland once more.

Georg's other friend, Sionius, had settled in the Prussian town of Gilgenburg (now called **Dąbrówno**). He had a letter from the believers back in Poznań, the town they had left with such sadness on August 24<sup>th</sup> 1548. "Please can you send us a teacher and preacher to help us?" said the letter. Sionius and the other elders considered the matter. "Georg is strong and fit," they said, "and he speaks fluent Polish. He knows his way around the area too." They decided that Georg should include Poznań in his travels as he went to and from Moravia. This led to Georg's most famous adventure.

In early March 1551 Georg reached Toruń on his way to Poznań. He needed to cross the River Vistula, which is very wide at this point. The local magistrate, fearing flooding, had had the bridge taken away to allow the water to flow away freely. If he wanted to get over the river, Georg would have to make his way across the thin ice that covered the water at this time of year. "Could I ride my horse over it?" he wondered. He decided to test the ice by just walking out carefully. A spit of land almost like an island separates two parts of the river in Toruń. Georg reached this in safety. "Can I get *right* across?" he wondered. He studied the ice carefully. There were no cracks, just a few holes to be avoided. He stepped off onto the ice.

At first all was well but then under pressure from the flood water beneath, the ice suddenly broke up. Georg was left on an ice floe being swept along on the river. He struggled to a floe that was nearer the bank... then to another... and another... and all the time the words from Psalm 148 were going round in his head: "Praise the Lord... ye waters that be above the heavens..." he struggled onto another floe... "Fire, and hail; snow, and vapours; stormy wind fulfilling his word..." ...and another yet nearer... "...let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent..."

Seeing his plight a crowd had gathered on the bank, shouting to Georg to encourage him. The mayor of the city, Herr Hoffmann, was among them. Seeing Georg concentrating all his efforts to judge his jumps across from floe to floe, the mayor took charge. "Silence!" he cried, "the man is concentrating – let him think." In quiet agony they followed along the bank watching as Georg struggled nearer and nearer, jumping from moving floe to moving floe. "Kings of the earth, and all people; princes, and all judges of the earth... Let them praise the name of the LORD..."

Now he was getting so near the bank the people could not restrain themselves, "To us, to us!" they cried, stretching out their arms as though they could somehow drag him to safety. Georg leapt again

and this time he landed on a floe that bumped up against the bank beside a little brick hut that was on the waterside in someone's garden. He scrambled out.

“God has saved him!” cried the onlookers. “...His glory is above the earth and heaven!” said Georg.

The whole incident caused quite a stir. The mayor publicly congratulated Georg. Georg was able to preach in the town and thanked God for his deliverance in his sermon. He felt sure God had saved his life because he had work for him to do.

In a few days the water level in the River Vistula dropped, and Georg was able to continue on his journey to Poznań where the Christians were waiting for their teacher and preacher to come. When he reached the town it too was flooded. He entered the town by boat and it was only just able to squeeze under the bridge because the level of the water was so high! Here the meetings had to be held in secret but now there were noblewomen – and then noblemen – as well as ordinary people coming along to the meetings. Gradually a church became established in the town from which they had been expelled on that sad August 24<sup>th</sup> of 1548. Georg was able to go back to Prussia and report to his friend Sionius and the others what God had done in Poznań.

Again and again Georg made the journey back to Poznań and the church grew. There were nobles and peasants, tailors, artisans, apothecaries... a nun!... all sorts of people were coming to faith in Jesus Christ in Poznań. Then the plague struck. People were dying. Georg hurried back to Poznań to help. The services were still held in secret and, to make sure that no one heard the singing and preaching, all the doors and windows were muffled up with pillows and bedding. Benedict II Idzbienski, the bishop, was furious. “He must die!” he ordered and he hired a small army of private assassins to hunt Georg down and kill him. But Georg disguised himself and carried on. Now he was preaching in the very houses of the nobles themselves.

Now Georg was called to answer for himself before Vicar General of Greater Poland at his Residence. Although he was allowed to leave the meeting unmolested, Georg was warned in no uncertain terms that he was “in danger” and should leave Poznań.

But now Georg's witness to the nobility in the area reached a crisis point. The most important person in Poznań was the local magnate and politician Count Jakub Ostroróg. His wife was hovering on the brink of conversion to the truth. She invited Georg to hold some meetings at the family's estate at Ostroróg (about 40 miles from Poznań) where she and members of the family and household would listen. Her husband was less sympathetic than she: he was elsewhere on the estate talking to some friends who were actively trying to turn him against his wife's new religious opinions. Whatever they said about her must have been very unkind and untrue because it made the count so angry with her that, believing their wicked words, he grabbed a whip and rushed off to the meeting, intending to drag his wife away in disgrace in front of all the onlookers!

It was not Georg himself who was preaching when the Count stormed into the room but his friend Matthias Czervenka. Georg was sitting beside him listening. Seeing the Count enter the room, Matthias prayerfully changed what he was saying to suit the needs of the Count. Far from dragging his wife away, Count Ostroróg stood listening, astonished. “Please sit down,” whispered Georg politely and the Count did so as though in a daze and remained for the whole of the service. “I felt as if I was standing before the very judgement seat of God that day,” he said afterwards and added that he thought he would have done as he was asked even if Georg had asked him to crawl under a bench or table, he was so struck by what he heard!

But now it was lunch time. Had the Count really taken in what had been said? Georg wondered. He decided that over the meal he would ask some questions about the sermon. That way he would find

out if the Count had understood. Yes, Matthias's prayer had been answered. The Count had followed everything – and surrendered his life to King Jesus in repentance! He understood the truth and believed it. He acted on what he believed too. The Roman Catholic ministers of the church of the Ostroróg estate were all dismissed. Instead the count appointed Georg to be the minister!

Georg still travelled regularly to Poznań but now another brother took over the work there. The gospel spread far and wide. For the rest of his life Georg continued to travel in Poland, Lithuania, Prussia and Bohemia, encouraging and strengthening the brethren. I'm sure he never forgot that sad day in August 1548 when the train of wagons rolled out of Poznań – but now God had his people all over the whole area!

### Some maths

Georg was offered his freedom in exchange for 1000 ducats. How much was that? It is difficult to calculate the value of things from one age to another but Gold today is worth around £50 per gram. The amount of gold in a ducat was not stable throughout history. However, at one time every ducat had to contain 3.442 grams of fine gold. Can you work out from this how much 1000 ducats would be worth today?<sup>7</sup> What would you be able to buy today with such a sum of money? While writing this lesson I looked up the average monthly wage in Britain and found it to be £2,220. Roughly how long would it take to earn Georg's ransom money on that basis?



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<sup>7</sup> I made it £172,100.