

Sam is a young teenager whose family has recently moved from Malawi to the United Kingdom. Sam's parents were missionaries working with the church in Malawi and since their return to the UK, Sam has been settling in to a new school and to a new and more secular culture. This has been a challenge to them all, and, after spending the Christmas holidays with the family, Grandad has been writing to Sam. He wants to do what the apostle Peter did for Silvanus when he encouraged him to stand firm in the grace of God (1 Peter 5:12) and to be able to give a response to the things people say about Christianity (1 Peter 3:15).

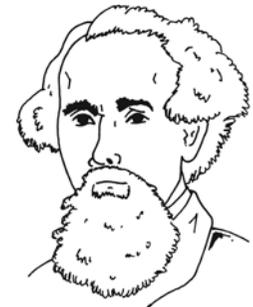
7th January Dear Sam,



We enjoyed our time with you and the family recently, and now that you're back in this country, Granny and I should be able to see more of you. This last Christmas must have seemed very different from the ones you celebrated in Africa – including the weather; last year it would be sunshine and warmth, but not this year. And I believe the people in Malawi maybe get nearer to the real meaning of Christmas than many people in our culture where Santa and his reindeer seem to get more attention than the baby Jesus.



I know you've joined the Scouts, and I remember a Scout Gang Show where there was a sketch based on the characters of Charles Dickens. Someone was dressed up as Scrooge and he came on stage with his Bah-Humbugs. Somebody else was meant to be David Copperfield, and of course there had to be Oliver Twist who was always asking for more.

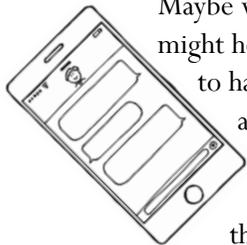


Messages From Grandad

These characters were acting out their parts and then an unknown character came on stage. They asked who he was and he answered, "I'm Charles Dickens, the one who created all of you." The sketch ended with the others saying "Never heard of him", and the Dickens character saying to himself, "Fancy – all these people and they don't know the one who created them."

It was a good sketch; it might have been called a parable, because something similar might be said about Jesus' life in this world. Many didn't recognise the One through whom (as John 1:3 says) everything came into existence. I'm afraid that, as you're discovering, there are many people in this country who don't know or care about their Creator who came to the world. So I can understand that, coming back from a land where so many do follow Jesus, you'll be having a hard time adjusting to life here.

I remember you saying that it hasn't been easy to settle into school life since you started at the Academy in August. When we were out walking on Boxing Day, you told me about some of the things you've heard people saying – things that are supposed to be reasons for rejecting "religion", and since then I've been wondering about whether we could continue that discussion by correspondence. Of course I would encourage you to discuss things with your mum and dad, but now that I'm retired I've got all the time in the world! You're probably into all kinds of social media, and while I stick to letters, I'm happy if you respond any way you like.



Maybe we could think about some things that might help to strengthen your faith and help you to have some answers to the things people say about Christianity. What about making it a New Year's resolution to write every few weeks, and see if we can keep it up through the year.

Encouragement for a Young Christian

One of the things you said is that it's not just other pupils but sometimes teachers who criticise Christianity – like your physics teacher who called people stupid if they believe that God made the world. He wasn't exactly wise in asking for that show of hands of those who "still" (as he put it) believe in a Creator God. I'm glad you had the courage to put your hand up, along with a few others, even if some people did call you names in the corridor afterwards. "Of course, little Sam still goes to church" is hardly a very intelligent view of such things.

When I was young it wasn't always easy to follow Jesus, but I'm sure it's much harder for you now. So many people see religion and Christianity as old-fashioned, out-of-date, something you grow out of. And so many concentrate on "things" – being rich, successful or famous – rather than God and regard people who believe in God and go to church as a bit weird.

I know you read quite a few children's books when you were younger, but I'm sure there's no danger of you falling into the trap of getting stuck at an infant level, like some teenagers who imagine that because they've grown out of such books ("I've had all I can take of David and Goliath") they can leave Christianity behind with the tooth fairy.

And when it comes to answering the things people throw at you, here are a few things we should remember about believing in Jesus and following Him:

- One is that there are many things we don't know. It would be terrible if people (grandparents included!) acted as if we were know-alls. We don't know all the answers. But that doesn't mean that we don't know *any* answers and I hope I can help you to have answers to some of the things people say.
- We also believe that a time will come when all questions will be answered – when we see Jesus face to face. For the moment – well, in the last letter he wrote, Paul referred to the



trials that had come to him because of his faith in Jesus and he wrote, “But I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed” (2 Timothy 1:12). There were things he didn’t understand and perhaps questions even he couldn’t answer, but he was sure that he was trusting a Lord who does have the answers.

• We should also remember that no amount of argument will make anyone a Christian. Do you know the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. The story of the hymn is an amazing story because its writer, John Newton, was once a wild man living an ungodly life. But in the hymn about his conversion, he said that it was “grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved”. What did he mean? Well, Jesus once said to His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16) – that’s what John Newton realised. When people become Christians they increasingly realise that it’s down to God’s Spirit calling them and drawing them to trust in Jesus.

• The other thing to remember is that it’s not likely any time soon to become easier to stand up for Jesus. Jesus never said it would be easy. He even said, “If they persecute me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). The persecution may be in a different league from what Christians face in some parts of the world, but for us too – well, commitment to Jesus isn’t going to make you popular with everybody.

The Bible says nobody should harm you if you stand up for what is right, but if you do suffer in any way because you follow Jesus, you will be blessed by God. It says: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honour Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defence to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.” (1 Peter 3:13-15)

Let me finish this first letter by referring to the story of Daniel in the Bible.

The book of Daniel starts with Daniel’s clear decision to follow God’s way wherever he was and whatever it would cost. By the time he faced the lions he would have been elderly, but the story starts when he was probably a teenager.

He was one of many prisoners deported to Babylon (in today’s Iraq). At first, things went really well for him. He was selected for special training for the Babylonian civil service. But there was a problem about the food served to Daniel and his friends. We don’t know all the details but perhaps it had been dedicated in the name of pagan gods.

And maybe that’s why “Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s food.” It wasn’t that he’d gone veggie! It was a sign of his loyalty to his God. And maybe you know the story – how he and his friends fared better on their chosen diet than others who (as we say) ate royally.

King Nebuchadnezzar had already tried to lead them away from their commitment to the Lord. With us, names don’t usually mean much. I don’t know if that’s true in Africa where you grew up, but here – well, one of your cousins is called George. That means farmer, but I don’t think his parents were trying to choose a career for him.

But in Bible times, names often did mean something, and the “el” part of Daniel’s name means God. By changing his name (to Belteshazzar) the king was trying to cut God (el) out of his life. Bel was the name of one of the (many) Babylonian gods, and Nebuchadnezzar wanted to turn him away from El and make him a worshipper of Bel.

But, whatever name Daniel/Belteshazzar had, he resolved (as it says) not to defile himself. It wasn’t like the New Year resolutions that people sometimes joke about; somebody makes a resolution to be kinder to their brother or sister, or get up earlier in the morning – but they’ve forgotten all about it by January the tenth.

Daniel's resolution did last. He did what Ecclesiastes 12:1 says: "Remember your Creator in the days of your youth". Of course "remember" doesn't mean thinking about past events. It's about trusting and honouring the Lord here and now.

That chapter goes on to some of the things that afflict people of my age – hearing not so good, not sleeping so well, and so on. I'm so glad to know that you want to "remember" Him now, not just when you're old like me!

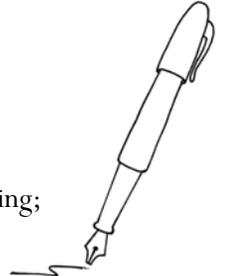
Let me know how you're getting on, and whether you're up for this plan of a New Year resolution to keep in touch.



Love from Grandad (and
Granny too)



11th January
Dear Sam,



I was delighted to get your message this morning; I didn't expect to hear from you so soon and maybe we'll struggle to keep up this early pace!

Thanks for making that list of things you've heard people say. I've added some others to make a kind of "syllabus" for our communications.

1. "How can you believe in God when so many horrible and wicked things happen in the world?"
2. "Religion has caused a lot of war and fighting and we'd be better off without it."
3. "Science has disproved the Bible."
4. "The Bible is full of contradictions."
5. "You only believe because that's the way you were brought up."
6. "You're weird for not being willing to do some things on a Sunday."
7. "Having sex with someone isn't that big a deal."
8. "Families come in all shapes and sizes now, and it's up to you whether you link up with or marry someone of the opposite or the same sex."
9. "It's OK to believe in Jesus privately if you must, but other people follow other religions and nobody can say which is the right one."

