

Bill Sykes' Little Bit

Archibald G. Brown

I have sometimes been asked, "How little can someone believe of the Gospel and still be saved?" My answer is that, with the work of the Holy Spirit, an elect sinner who hears a very basic message can go away knowing much more than he immediately realizes. Certainly, it can be enough to believe and be saved.

The excerpt below is from Godfrey Holden Pike's *The Life And Work of Archibald G. Brown, Preacher and Philanthropist* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1892) 93-5. It is the account of a nineteenth-century missionary to London's East End who visited a coster (a fruit and vegetable seller) who was on his death bed. The coster's name was Bill Sykes.

If you're familiar with Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, you know that a murderous villain in the story is named Bill Sikes. Notice that the spelling is different. This, and the fact that Dickens' character was fictional, didn't stop people who read the account below when it was published from conflating the two and creating an urban legend that the Dickens' character was a real person who repented before he died. The coster was not the murderer. But what follows is still a remarkable story of a man's simple trust in the central message of the Christian faith. Please read it, and then I'll have a short afterword—PD.

So that no mistake may be made about the character of Bill Sykes's theology, the following extract from the diary of the missionary who visited him may be given —

April 24th.— . . . Found him sitting up in bed. He was more anxious about his soul than at any time yet. I explained to him again how Christ took our place, bore our sins, and suffered our death. "I see it now," said he; "He suffered for me, then." I said "Yes." From this moment I have no hesitation in saying that Bill Sykes entered into peace. The passage most blessed to him was Isa. xliii. 25: "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins." Christ taking Sykes's sins, and Sykes receiving Christ's righteousness, was all to him. I know not whose cup of joy is most full to-night—his or mine.

April 25th.—Found Sykes much worse in body, but exceedingly happy in soul. "I will not remember thy sins" were the first words on his lips. Called again in the afternoon, and found a rather rough-looking customer in

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the room. I was led to speak to him, and Sykes kept chiming in, "You can have it for nothing, mate."

April 26th.—We had a happy time together, reading the Word and praying.

April 27th.—Found him cheerful, but very low. His son was present, and I commenced speaking to him about spiritual matters. Bill Sykes, interrupting my conversation, said, "GIVE HIM THAT LITTLE BIT." "What bit?" "THAT LITTLE BIT ABOUT CHRIST TAKING MY PLACE, AND HOW HE HAD MY PUNISHMENT FOR ME. *That's the bit.*"

Mr. Brown himself referred to this incident, and a passage from what he said about it will not only show unmistakably what his sentiments regarding the gospel are, but will show how the incidents of the work always in progress serve to supply the most telling illustrations of the truth for others.

Archbishops and Bishops, Pastors and Evangelists, never had a sounder piece of advice given them than our Missionary received from the dying coster. "Give him that little bit," said Bill, as the Missionary was speaking to his son. "What bit?" "That little bit about Christ taking my place, and how He had my punishment for me. *That's the bit.*"

"Ah, Bill, you are right! Though a Christian of only three days' standing, the Spirit has led you with unerring wisdom to the central truth, the core of the whole matter." Never read a line of religious controversy in all his life. No discussions about the Atonement had ever occupied his attention. He just spoke out of his heart. He knew what "that little bit" had done for him. He felt the peace it had brought into his poor sinful soul, and he was sure that if his son was ever saved it would be the "little bit" that would do it. His trust, his hope for himself and others, was all wrapped up in that little bit about Christ's substitution. Of course, Bill did not use so long a word. He would not have known its meaning had he heard it. "Christ taking my sins and having my punishment," was his way of putting it. He trusted the *fact*, if he did not know the term. Having

proved the power of "that little bit," he was in a hurry for the Missionary to come to it with his son.

It would be no evil thing, but a matter for thankfulness, if there were a widespread impatience of the same sort in all congregations—a refusal to sit quiet unless "that little bit" was given to the people. Everything lies in it. All truths spring out of it, or circle round it. It is the acorn that contains within itself every limb and twig of the forest king. It is the centre of the solar system of grace. All the doctrines march in their courses round the Cross. Whatever else the Christian worker may leave behind him, let him be sure he carries "that little bit." Without it he is more than useless, whatever else he may bring forth. With it he enlists the power of God. More than dynamic force lies hidden in "that little bit." It works what nothing else can or ever will. Would he gain *the attention* of his audience? Let him tell "that little bit." There is a never-failing freshness about the theme. It caught the ear of poor Bill Sykes when all else failed. It does so still with thousands. There is a heavenly fascination about the theme. The best cure yet for empty sanctuaries is plenty of "that little bit." Modern Thought may gather the few, the ancient fact still draws the multitudes.

Some might object after reading this that Bill's knowledge was too small. Certainly, a sinner needs to know more than just that "little bit" to be saved. But consider this. Bill's knowledge of and trust in the "little bit" implied much more. These are the things the article above says that Bill believed and that constituted his "little bit": He believed that Christ took his place, that Christ suffered Bill's punishment for him and that he received Christ's righteousness, that God will not remember his sins, and that "You can have it for nothing, mate."

It's self-evident from what we've read that, without knowing the theological words, Bill believed in the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ for his sins. Thus, Bill had to know that he was a sinner in need of a Savior and that Jesus Christ was that Savior. He had to fully trust in Jesus Christ as his Savior and believe that Jesus Christ's atonement was fully efficient to pay for his sins. He had to believe in the imputation of his sins to Jesus Christ and the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to him. He had to trust that Christ's death expiated or removed the guilt incurred by those sins, propitiating and satisfying God's wrath so that He would remember them no more. The result of this, of course, is God's declaration of "not guilty" that the Bible calls justification. Additionally, in declaring, "You can have it for nothing, mate," he had to know that nothing additional was needed in addition to what Jesus Christ had done—no good works could add to the finished work of Jesus Christ. In other words, Bill Sykes "little bit" implied enough doctrine that, if explained in detail, could fill volumes, and Bill Sykes' theology was better than that of many respected theologians. What Bill Sykes heard was enough of a "little

bit" that the Holy Spirit could use it to mushroom the bare information into a system of theology that his gift of saving faith could rest upon. Thank God for the Bill Sykeses of the world who by God's grace grasp the "simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3) and for those who bring the Gospel to them!

—Peter Ditzel