

Events from World War 1 & 2

Introduction for teachers

1. What does the study of this topic show us about God Himself?

God is a powerful protector

2. Which scripture passages illustrate this aspect of God?

Psalm 46:1- God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in the time of trouble.

Psalm 50:15 - Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you and you will honour me.

3. How does understanding God in this way change our lives?

We can confidently have trust in a supernatural God who is mighty to save.

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The angels of Mons

During World War I, the armies of Britain, France and other allies were confronted by the armed forces of Germany, supported by its allies. On a battle front that extended across south-east Belgium and northern France, the German armies were advancing towards the west. They had broken through the allied lines and the British situation was desperate, due to the heavy casualties they had sustained and the lack of reserves.

The German breakthrough had occurred at Bethune, near Mons, in Belgium, and they concentrated their attack at the point with high explosive and machine gunfire, preparatory to a bayonet attack in mass formation.

Suddenly the enemy shell fire lifted and concentrated on a slight rise beyond the town. The ground here was absolutely bare, yet the enemy machine guns and shells raked it from end to end with a hail of lead; then, as suddenly as it had begun, the enemy's fire ceased. The dense line of German troops, which had started to move forward to victory in mass formation, suddenly halted. As the British watched, they saw that line break! The Germans threw down everything they had and fled in frantic panic.

What had caused this retreat by an army that appeared to be a step away from victory?

A senior German officer who was taken prisoner immediately after this incident gave this account to the staff captain of the 1st Corp intelligence, 1st British Army Headquarters.

The German officer stated, "The order was given to advance in mass formation and our troops were marching behind us singing their way to victory when Fritz, my lieutenant here, said, "Herr Kapitan, just look at that open ground behind Bethune. There is a brigade of cavalry coming up through the smoke drifting across it. They must be mad, these English, to advance against such a force as ours in the open. I suppose they must be the cavalry of one of their colonial forces, for, see, they are all in white uniform and they're mounted on white horses!"

"Strange," I replied, "I've never heard of the English having any white-uniformed cavalry, whether colonial or not. They have all been fighting on foot for some years, and anyway, their men all wear khaki, not white."

"Well, they're plain enough," he replied. "Look, our guns have got their range now. They'll be blown to pieces in no time."

The German officer continued his description of event. "We saw shell bursting among the horse and their riders. Yet not one horse or rider fell. They advanced at a quiet walk-trot, in parade ground formation, each man and horse in his exact place."

"Shortly afterwards our machine guns opened heavy fire, raking the advancing cavalry with a hail of lead; but on they came, and not one single man or horse fell. Steadily they advanced, clear in the shining sunlight, and a few paces in front of them rode their leader, fine figure of man, whose hair, like spun gold, shone in a aura around his head. By his side was a great sword, but his hands lay quietly holding the reins, as his huge white charger carried him proudly forward."

"The heavy shell fire and concentrated machine gunfire continued, but the white cavalry advanced, unyielding, untouched by the attack, like the incoming tide surging over a sandy beach. Then a great ear came upon me and I turned to flee. Yes, I, an officer of the Prussian Guard, fled, panic-stricken, and around me were hundreds of terrified men, whimpering like children, throwing away their weapons in order their movements should not be impeded..... all running. Their one desire was to escape from that advancing white cavalry; above all, from their awe-inspiring leader whose hair shone like a golden halo."

"That is all I have to tell you," the German concluded. "We are beaten. The German army is broken. There may be fighting, but we have lost the war; we are beaten by the White Cavalry.... I cannot understand I cannot understand."

A number of German prisoners were questioned in the days following and, although their accounts differed in some details, their story was substantially the same. Thus it was that the British Expeditionary Force was given sufficient time to withdraw to safer positions and prepare the counter attack that was to finally lead to victory on November 11th 1918.

1. The following terms are all related to warfare. Find the exact meaning of each and write it: allies, reserves, bayonet attack, mass formation, cavalry, casualty, shell fire, machine gun fire and counter attack.
2. Read the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:8-19. In what ways is this story similar to the story of the Angels of Mons? In what ways is it different?
3. Make a sketch map of Western Europe, showing the borders of the countries mentioned in the story.

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The Evacuation of Dunkirk, 1940

May 1940 was some of the darkest days in the history of Europe, and in particular of Britain. German forces under Hitler were surging west, having overthrown Holland and Belgium and broken through the defences on the north eastern borders of France.

The British Expeditionary Force, fighting in France, as the German forces advanced in a pincer movement, threatening to encircle the entire force of 355,000. The decision was made to evacuate the British Expeditionary Force from France. The B.E.F. were only 8 to 12 miles (approximately 13 to 20 kilometres) from Dunkirk, but the German forces were only 10 miles (16 km) behind them. Winston Churchill later wrote in a history of the war that at best they expected to save 2000 to 30,000 of the total. "The whole root and core and brain of the British Army seemed about to perish on the field or be led into ignominious and starving captivity," he wrote.

But Britain had a godly sovereign. Seeing this situation developing, His Majesty King George VI requested that Sunday May 26 should be observed as a National Day of Prayer. In a stirring broadcast he called the people of Britain and the Commonwealth to commit their cause to God. Together with members of the cabinet, the King attended Westminster Abbey, whilst millions of his subjects in all parts of the Commonwealth flocked to the churches in prayer. Hundreds who had neglected church attendance for years were moved to join the crowds in prayer. Britain was given inspiring leadership in those days, and her people responded immediately when this kind of initiative was taken. The whole nation and Commonwealth were at prayer that Sunday. The scene outside Westminster Abbey was remarkable – photographs show long queues of people who could not even get in, the Abbey was so crowded. So much so that a daily newspaper the following morning exclaimed, "Nothing like this has ever happened before!" In its hour of deep distress a heart-cry from both monarch and people was going up to God in prayer. And that cry did not go unanswered. For very soon at least three miracles were seen to happen.

The first was that for some reason, which has never yet been fully explained, Hitler over-ruled his generals and halted the advance of his armoured columns, at the very point when they could have proceeded to the British Army's annihilation being only 10 miles away. Later Mr. Churchill asserted in his memoirs that this was because Hitler believed that his air superiority would be sufficient to prevent a large scale evacuation by sea. That is very significant in terms of the second miracle.

A storm of unprecedented fury broke over Flanders, a region just east of Dunkirk, on Tuesday May 28, grounding the German squadrons of planes and enabling

the British army formations to move up the 8 to 12 miles to the coast on foot. The darkness of the storm and the violence of the rain, with scarcely any interruption from enemy aircraft were wonderful protection as the planes were unable to operate in such turbulent conditions.

Hitler had obviously not taken the weather into his reckoning, nor the One who controls the weather.

And the third miracle? Despite the storm in Flanders, a great calm such as has rarely been experienced, settled over the English Channel during the days which followed and its waters became as still as a mill pond. It was this quite extraordinary calm which enabled a vast armada of little ships, big ships, war ships, privately owned motor cruisers from British rivers and estuaries. In fact almost anything that would float, to ply back and forth between Dunkirk and the English port of Dover, in a desperate bid to rescue as many men as possible. There were so many ships involved in the evacuation that Douglas Bader, a famous Spitfire pilot, described the scene like this in his book *"Flight For The Sky"*:

"The sea from Dunkirk to Dover during these days of the evacuation looked like any coastal road in England on a bank holiday. It was solid with shipping. One felt one could walk across without getting one's feet wet, or that's what it looked like from the air. There were naval escort vessels, sailing dinghies, rowing boats, paddle steamers, indeed every floating device known in this country. They were all taking British soldiers from Dunkirk back home. You could identify Dunkirk from the Thames estuary by the huge pall of black smoke rising straight up into a windless sky from the oil tanks which were ablaze just inside the harbour."

Yet still, to a large extent, the German air squadrons were unable to intervene. Certainly not in force, nor in the way Hitler had anticipated, for so many of these squadrons remained grounded, so much so that General Halder, Chief of the German General Staff, three days after the High Command had so proudly boasted that the British Army was about to be annihilated, was obliged to record in his diary on 30th May that "Bad weather has grounded our air squadrons, and now we must stand by and watch countless thousands of the enemy getting away to England right under our noses."

Even though some squadrons did get through, it seems that yet another miracle happened. Many of the troops on the beaches were favoured with a strange immunity. When about 400 men were being machine-gunned and bombed, systematically by about sixty enemy aircraft, one man who flung himself down with the rest reported that, after the strafing was over, he was amazed to find that there was not a single casualty.

Another man, a chaplain, was likewise machine-gunned and bombed as he lay on the beach. After what seemed like an eternity, he realized he had not been hit,

and rose to his feet to find that the sand where he had been lying was pitted with bullet holes, and his figure was outlined on the ground. Truly, amazing things were happening. There were signs on every hand that God had intervened and delivered officers and men from the hands of a mighty foe who, humanly speaking had them at its mercy.

Sunday June 9th was appointed as a Day of National Thanksgiving and once again the people of Britain and the Commonwealth joined in prayer, this time giving thanks to God who had miraculously saved the entire British force of 355,000 men from the jaws of death and returned them safely home. Psalm 124 was read in the churches where thanksgiving was made. The closing verse read, "Praised be the Lord who has not given us over for a prey unto their teeth. Our soul is escaped even as a bird out of the snare of the fowler: the snare is broken and we are delivered. Our help stands in the name of the Lord who has made heaven and earth."

1. Use an atlas to locate Dunkirk, Dover, Flanders, the English Channel, Holland, Belgium, Germany, France.
2. What is meant by an evacuation?
3. Find words that mean: humiliating, to come between, of special importance.
4. What do you think was the 'pincer movement' whereby the German armies advanced?
5. What lesson can we learn from this event? a) for ourselves b) for our nation.

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