

Real Life Stories

My Substitute - by Sir James Simpson, M.D.

1811 - 1870



Discoverer of Chloroform as an Anaesthetic

Chloroform is a chemical that exists as a gas or a liquid, whereas an anaesthetic is a substance which numbs the pain of patients or knocks them out in preparation for surgery. This brief story tells of the man who discovered such a use of chloroform, and how he also discovered something even better...

James Simpson was born in Scotland in 1811. He was a smart boy with a love for books. His knowledge and thirst for learning led him to medical studies, after which he became a very capable surgeon. He was an excellent lecturer in obstetrics, obtained a high position in the University, attracted people with his magnetic personality, and was sought after by many patients. By the young age of 31, Simpson was already a wealthy and reputable doctor.

Yet Simpson felt dissatisfied and uneasy. He was searching for something deeper, wondering what the meaning of life was. He did not exert himself to pursue an answer for long though, because he was soon caught up in his material pursuits. Having faith in himself and the world, he chose instead to focus on his earthly hopes and ambitions. Outwardly, he followed the Christian faith, regularly attending St Stephen's Church, but his real opinion of Christianity was: "good at death but not in life". Even after his dear little daughter fell ill and died, his revived search for answers to life's questions was short-lived. Not surprisingly, he did not persist, for his worldly-mindedness carried him back to his work once more.

Then came the medical discovery of chloroform. Simpson and his helpers, Dr Duncan and Dr Keith, had tested various drugs for use in anaesthesia, but to no avail. When these three men finally tried chloroform, they made headway. They took deep breaths of its fumes to test its effect on the body. Dr Keith began laughing loudly; Dr Duncan danced round the room like a child; and Simpson fell into a dazed stupor! Soon, all three collapsed. Chloroform was proven a successful anaesthetic! This sudden and wonderful discovery brought much fame to Simpson, and you would think he would feel happy and accomplished, perched atop all his eminent achievements. But this doctor was still not satisfied. The nagging questions of his early life kept returning, which by God's providence, led him to another and an even greater discovery.

Simpson had witnessed and was touched by the extraordinary peace which his friend, Dr Reid, manifested while suffering from a very painful terminal illness. Reid was also heard praying and uttering his dying words: "The world is behind", something that impressed upon Simpson, whose life was all centred around the world. God also used an invalid patient of Simpson's to awaken him spiritually. She once wrote (putting herself in his shoes), "When benevolence shall have run its course, when there shall be no sick to heal, no disease to cure, when all I have been engaged about comes to a dead stop—WHAT is to fill this heart and mind of mine?"

Simpson had been addicted to wealth and honours but now he was changing. He felt he desperately needed Christ. "I felt I must go somewhere tonight, I wish to come to Christ, but I can't see Him," he told his invalid friend. Having been urged by her to repent of his sins and trust the Lord for salvation, Simpson received Christ, and became a whole new person who possessed a better understanding of Scripture, prayed with greater conviction, and had a new desire to know and serve God more. In his lecture room, he shared with his students his conversion, and called himself the "oldest sinner" and "youngest believer" there. He became genuinely interested in the spiritual welfare of others, including his children's. Simpson's ambitious self-love had died, and in its place grew a love for Christ!

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At the end of his life, in his fifties, Simpson was honoured with knighthood. His discovery of chloroform as an anaesthetic won him applause, even the confidence of Queen Victoria who bore Prince Leopold under chloroform. In his teaching, Simpson also contributed much to the advancement of anaesthesia. When asked what his greatest discovery had been, Sir James Simpson said without hesitation, "That I have a Saviour."

Truly, the most important thing in Simpson's life was a personal and close relationship between him and God rather than money, success, capability, or the praise and support of man? How about you – can you say the same?

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15)

When he died in 1870, over 30,000 mourners lined the streets of Edinburgh for his funeral - a send-off few doctors or surgeons could hope for today. The plaque dedicated to James Simpson in Westminster Abbey reads:

"To whose genius and benevolence

The world owes the blessings derived

From the use of chloroform for

The relief of suffering

Laus Deo"

. . . Gleaned from Bible Witness