

A VERY PRESENT HELP

A Tribute to the Faithfulness of God

By
Lieutenant General Sir William Dobbie
GCMG KCB DSO

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble

– Psalm 46:1



Ettrick Press

2023

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First published in the UK, 1944.

ISBN 978-1-915777-10-2

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Published by
Ettrick Press, 98 The Brow,
BRIGHTON, BN2 6LN, UK

The publishers would like to thank the descendants of
Lt Gen Sir William Dobbie
for allowing and approving this reprint

Publisher's Introduction

This book is a hugely respected account of the siege of the island of Malta during the early years of the Second World War. Malta held a strategic position in the middle of the Mediterranean and was a British dominion. Because of this it was at the receiving end of continuous bombing raids from both Italian and German air forces. Shipping bringing vital supplies to the island were also constantly attacked. Lieutenant General Sir William Dobbie (1879–1964) was brought out of retirement and commissioned as Governor of Malta in 1941. In that role he rallied the islanders, encouraging them to trust in God, and saw Malta strengthened and brought through the Axis onslaught. However, this book is not in any way a complete account of the siege of Malta, nor could it ever be said to rank amongst the best histories of these events.

Instead, *A Very Present Help* is much more than a history of war. It is testimony to the force controlling every circumstance that comes to pass in the world — the providence of God. Writing elsewhere, Lt Gen Dobbie noted that we have lost the true perspective on things. ‘We are living in a mechanised age, and we have been imagining that the machine and the material are decisive, and that the man and the spiritual have ceased to be of much account.’ After the events witnessed on Malta, Dobbie wrote:

Important as these things may be, there is still an incalculable factor which is more important than any other — and that is the spiritual. ... Disaster and defeat were turned into victory, and while acknowledging wholeheartedly the splendid spirit, endurance and courage of all who played their part, yet we are forced back on the conclusion that ‘if it had not been the Lord who was on our side...’ the impossible could not have been achieved.*

We desperately need to regain that perspective in society today.

* Foreword: *Britain's Conquest of the Mediterranean*. (1945) London: Burke.

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Primarily, this book is a personal testimony to the difference which faith in Jesus Christ makes in a person's life. It demonstrates how the Christian has a refuge in time of trouble — a God who delights to hear and answer prayer, and who works miracles on behalf of his people. It plainly teaches that God has supplied his people with an infallible guidebook for life in the Bible, and that he leads his people unflinchingly through the various situations life brings. This book challenges anyone who has not considered the Christian gospel to examine its claims — not so much through arguments about what is the truth, but by the living witness of the impact of Jesus on the life of one soldier disciple.

To those who are already Christians, Lt Gen Dobbie provides encouragement to press on. He points us to the ever-present help of Jesus for his people. If your difficulties seem too great, read and be encouraged by how God answered prayers for Malta in miraculous ways. But God does more than miracles. God is faithful to his people in the ordinary and everyday too. As Dobbie states,

... the greatest evidences of God's help and his care were to be seen in the innumerable small mercies which we were constantly experiencing. Many of these are known only to oneself and God; many others would not take the fancy of outsiders, being insignificant and unshowy. But they were very real to the one who experienced them. As one now looks back on these signal proofs of his mercy and his gracious help, one can wholeheartedly say, 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.'

Dobbie continually calls us to praise our God for all the blessings he constantly gives to his people in Jesus. This should make the Christian examine whether they are living up to these blessings: Are we being faithful in our witness to our Lord and Master?

Eighty years have passed since the events described, but they are still as amazing and fresh as ever. More importantly, William Dobbie's Saviour is still the same, 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and forever.' He still saves sinners, and welcomes those without any hope or help in themselves to find refuge in him.

Foreword

DURING the course of a long, varied and interesting military career I have had many tokens of God's great goodness to me. I have experienced his help in all sorts of circumstances. I have seen his overruling control in my life, and his guidance in my affairs. I have been amazed at his faithfulness to me, in spite of much unfaithfulness on my part toward him. I have been specially impressed by his forbearance, and patience with me, and by the way he has loaded me with benefits which I have but ill deserved. I therefore desire to acknowledge my debt to him, and in this imperfect way to express my gratitude. That is one reason why I have written this book. In all these experiences I have learned lessons which have stood me in good stead. It is possible that these lessons may be of help to others, perhaps to my brother officers in the fighting services. This is the other reason why I have written this book. I desire to share with these others those things which have been of such help to me. I desire to emphasize, especially to the rising generation, that it is a practical and intensely real thing to let Christ come into one's life, and that today, as ever before, it is no vain thing to trust in the living God.

W.G.S. DOBBIE

London

September, 1944.

The Crisis of 1940

Chapter 1

THE SUMMER of 1940 was a time of crisis for the British Empire, and indeed for the whole world. Disaster had come to our expeditionary force in France, and although most of the personnel were saved, we lost nearly all our equipment, and our Army ceased to exist (for the time being) as an effective instrument of war. The French nation, our ally at that time, was brought to its knees, and forced out of the war. The British Empire then stood entirely alone, and faced the victorious might of Germany and her satellites. The heart of the Empire, Great Britain, was exposed to a full-scale attack by sea and air from the nearby bases in France and Belgium, recently acquired by the Germans, and the forces available for the defence of the country were ludicrously inadequate. It was at this time that Italy, the chief satellite of Germany, and up till then theoretically neutral, or at any rate nonbelligerent, decided to throw in her lot unreservedly with Germany, and declared war against us.

This decision immediately put an entirely new complexion on the strategical situation, especially in the Mediterranean. Bad as the situation was before, it now became infinitely worse, since our vital lifeline to Egypt and the East through the Mediterranean was compromised and rendered practically useless. It was very evident that if the enemy gained and retained undisputed control of the Mediterranean, our plans and our activities would be so seriously prejudiced that the chances of winning through to survival and ultimate victory would be very remote. It was evident, also, that Malta, lying as it does in the very centre of the Mediterranean, and flanking the Italian lifeline between Italy and North Africa, was not only of the greatest importance, but was, in fact, the vital key point which must be held at all costs. Its loss would obviously open the

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door to disasters of the first magnitude, the outcome of which was not good to contemplate.

The situation in Malta, moreover, was a replica, in miniature, of the general situation in Great Britain. The isolation, the formidable strength of the enemy's forces, the proximity of bases from which his attacks could be launched, the unbelievable paucity of our defensive resources, the great civilian population exposed to a ruthless enemy, the dependence on seaborne supplies, and the expectation of attack in overwhelming strength — all these things and many others went to make up the defence problem of Malta, as they did the similar problem in Great Britain on a vaster scale.

Such was the situation which presented itself to me a few weeks after my wife and I had landed in Malta, where I had been sent, at a moment's notice, to take up the post of Governor.

We landed on the 28th April, 1940, and six weeks later Italy declared war against the British Empire. I thus found myself confronted with problems and difficulties of an unusual nature, and for which I had had no previous experience. But, through the goodness of God, I had learned to know something of his grace and power long before I reached Malta, and that knowledge stood me in good stead in the difficult circumstances in which I was placed. If I had had to face the difficulties relying only on my own wisdom and strength, I would have found these difficulties too great. But I found that God was to me a resource and a helper to whom I could always turn; that he was, in fact, 'a very present help in trouble.' That fact made all the difference to me, and the experience I had of him and of his help, and of the confidence he engendered during the two wonderful years in which my wife and daughter and I were privileged to serve in Malta, will never be forgotten.

For I was then dealing with one whom I already knew, and who by his grace was no stranger to me. I had proved his faithfulness time and time again, and that in spite of all my unfaithfulness to him; and this made all the difference. It was like meeting an old

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friend in new circumstances, a friend whom I had tested and proved times without number, and who had never let me down. I knew that not only was he all-loving, but all-wise, and all-powerful as well, and was fully able to help me through my present difficulties, and to bring Malta through her trials.

As a consequence of this confidence, I thought it right, in the early days of the siege, to issue to the garrison of Malta, weak as it was, a Special Order of the Day, defining the policy governing the defence of the fortress. It ran as follows:

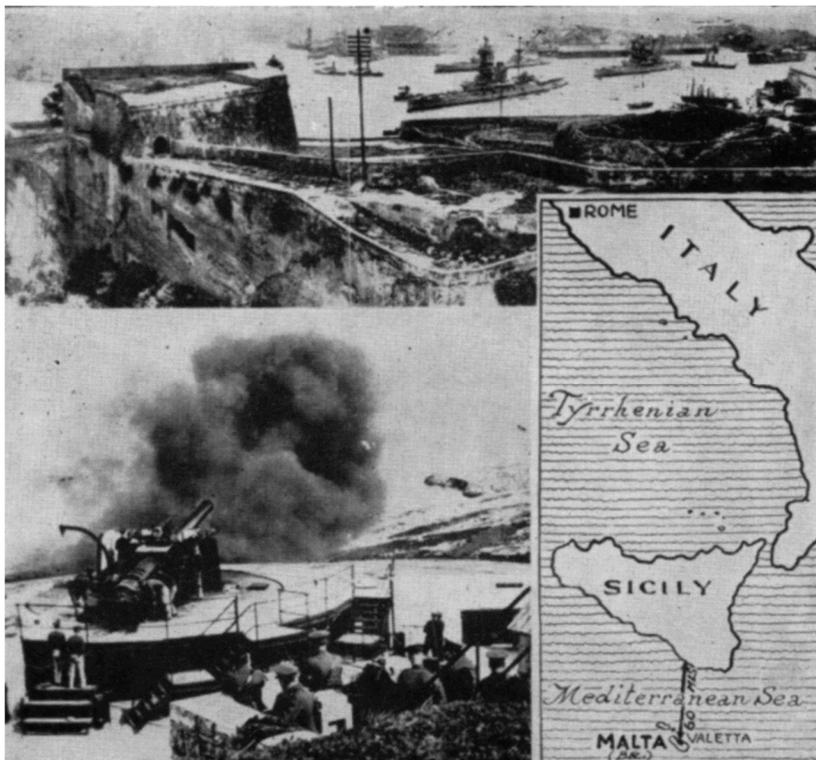
The decision of his Majesty's Government to fight on until our enemies are defeated will have been heard with the greatest satisfaction by all ranks of the garrison of Malta. It may be that hard times lie ahead of us, but however hard they may be, I know that the courage and determination of all ranks will not falter, and that with God's help we will maintain the security of this fortress. I therefore call upon all officers and other ranks humbly to seek God's help, and then, in reliance upon him, to do their duty unflinchingly.

I will describe later on in more detail the happenings of that wonderful period, full as it was of many tokens of God's gracious dealings with me at other times, and to set down some of the lessons I have learned, so that God's name may be glorified thereby, as it becomes apparent how wonderfully good he was to one very unworthy, and that others may profit from the things he has taught me — things which stood me in such good stead in times of stress. I specially desire that this recital may help my brother officers in the fighting services to appreciate the reality of God, and that they may find in him, as I have done (and perhaps more fully still), that he is able and willing to be to us all that we need, both in our professional and private life, and that with him life can be a very wonderful thing.

As I write this I look back on many mistakes and failures on my part, both of omission and commission — on the many times I have

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failed him, and must have grieved and disappointed him. And yet, through it all, I am amazed at his forbearance and kindness to me. These thoughts create a sense of shame in myself, but an intense feeling of gratitude to the one who has stood by me in spite of all.



Map showing the position of Malta in relation to Sicily and the Italian mainland

Top: The harbour of Valetta with British men-of-war at anchor

Bottom: One of the big coastal guns