

days Alfred's bishops taught them how to live the Christian life before sending them away in peace.

Alfred's Living Faith

Alfred saw that he needed to protect and restore his land. To do that, he built earthen forts near every big town. In such forts, a small force could protect itself against the Danes long enough for Alfred to bring help. Half the Saxons could be with his army while the other half stayed to protect their families and harvest the crops.

The Danes were strongest at sea, so Alfred designed tall boats that could fire down into their ships. This gave the Saxons an advantage along the coast.

Most importantly, Alfred restored learning. Hardly anyone knew Latin anymore, so Alfred and his churchmen translated works of philosophy, geography, and church management into Old English.

Alfred's Jewel.

Alfred had one of these made for each of his bishops.

Find seven changes in the second image.

Solution online at www.christianheroes.org/alfred_resources/



Through this work he helped save the Christian faith in England.

Alfred became the strongest king in England. His Christian faith gave him a noble character. Looking back years later, he wrote, "Covetousness and the greatness of this earthly power never will please me, nor did I altogether very much yearn after this earthly authority."

He wasn't just talking, either. He had a chance to grab the kingdom of Mercia, but he refused because it was not the right thing to do. Instead, he captured London from the Danes and returned it to Mercia. Eventually Mercia chose to put itself under his son Edward.

Another time, Edward captured the wife and children of a Danish king. Alfred could have held them as hostages. Instead, he sent them safely back to the Danes with soldiers to protect them. He believed in showing mercy just as God shows mercy on us through Christ. ✿

Issue 4

Christian Heroes

Church History for Kids



Alfred the Great The King Who Preserved a Nation and its Faith

When Alfred came to power, he was just a teenager, and a sick one at that. By faith and hard work, he became the greatest king England has ever known and protected the Christian faith from its enemies.

Alfred looked around with amazement. To a four-year-old, Rome was wonderful. He would have liked to splash in the water that sprayed in a nearby fountain, but the strong arm of a Saxon soldier held him on the back of a horse whose hooves clicked on a stone pavement instead of sinking into sand as they would at home. Stone monuments rose taller than trees—so tall he wondered how the marble had been raised to their peaks.

Although Alfred's father was king back in Wessex, England, his family did not own a single palace built all of stone. Here in Rome there were many stone buildings. Even the ruins were mounds of stone.

Alfred, Bishop Swithun, and their Saxon guards were in Rome to see Pope Leo IV. On the day they came into his presence, the old man was dressed in a scarlet robe. He blessed Alfred. Romans strapped a little sword to the boy's side, slipped a white and purple cloak over his shoulders,

and placed a light crown on his head, honoring him as a consul of Rome. Alfred thought he was being made a king. He would remember that moment all his life.

The day came when the Saxons began their slow, dangerous trip home. They had to journey up Italy, across the Alps, through Gaul, and back to sea.

A month later, the Saxons reached the channel that separates France from England. Did Alfred's eyes dart across the

*For Christ when he will
Gives good after ill,
And wealth by his grace
In trouble's hard place,
And happy the mind
That to Him is resigned.
Alfred the Great
(849-899)*

Ask Yourself

1. What are some incidents and actions which demonstrated Alfred's faith?
2. What four books would you take with if you were exiled to a desert island?
3. Is it ever right for Christians to fight in wars?
4. Read about Charlemagne and compare him with Alfred.

water, looking for sails as they stepped into the boat that would take them home? Pirates lurked out here, fierce northmen, known as Danes or Vikings, at war with all the Christian lands of Europe.

Across the grey-blue water were his mother, father, and three living brothers. He could hardly wait to see them all, especially his mother.

The Book

Good queen Osburh wanted her sons to learn to read. One day, shortly after Alfred was safely home in Wessex, she called her four boys to her (Ethelstan, the oldest, had died) and held up a handwritten book. Slowly she opened it for them to see. Alfred caught his breath with longing. Half the front page was taken up with a flaming letter drawn in red and gold. Queen Osburh promised to give the book to the first one who could learn to read it.

Alfred was fascinated. "Will you really give the book to the one who can understand it and be the first to say it back to you?" he asked. When she answered yes, he seized the book and ran as fast as his legs would carry him to a teacher at court. From him, he learned the words by heart.

Saxon lettering



Then he took the book back to his mother and repeated it line by line. He had not learned to read, but Queen Osburh gave him the precious work of art anyhow. Alfred would love books all his life.

Soon after this, his mother died.

Back to Rome

Events moved quickly after Osburh's death. King Ethelwulf decided to visit Rome himself and took Alfred with him. Again the boy made the nine hundred mile trip. Ethelwulf left Wessex in charge of Alfred's brother Ethelbald.

Coming back from Rome, Ethelwulf stopped at Paris. Foolishly he married a twelve-year-old girl named Judith and made promises to her which were illegal under Saxon law. Ethelbald was furious. He prepared to fight his father to keep him out of England. However, the English people felt differently. They loved Ethelwulf and hurried down to the shore to help him off the ship. Wessex was tense until King Ethelwulf agreed to let Ethelbald rule Wessex while he took the two little states of Kent and Essex. There would not be war. Years later, Alfred still thought that Ethelbald had behaved badly.

King Ethelwulf died two years after his return to England. Ethelbald also died soon afterward and Ethelbert became king.

In 866 the Danes returned. They had left Wessex in peace for five years. This time they came to stay and settled in East Anglia. That same year, Ethelbert died. Of the five brothers, only Ethelred and Alfred were left.

Sixteen-Year-Old Commander

Alfred was now sixteen years old. He had practiced hard to become a skilled hunter of boars, stags, and hares. Already he was a man of faith, who spent long hours in prayer, asking God to keep him from doing wrong and strengthen him to do right. He had a disease which made his body stiffen with sharp pains, so that he seldom had half an hour free from misery.

Even so, Ethelred named him second in command—Secundarius. Now the fate of southern England rested in large part on Alfred's shoulders. Would he be man enough to carry the load?

Alfred Marries

In 868 the Danes attacked the neighboring kingdom of Mercia. Ethelred and Alfred led an army to their assistance. Mercia did not have much heart for a fight, and neither did the Danes, who eventually left.

When Alfred rode home to Wessex, he did not ride alone. At his side was his bride Ealswith.

Victory at Ashdown

The year 871 was a year of battles. The men of Wessex had to fight the Danes nine times. By pretending to withdraw from the Danes who were holed up at Reading, Ethelred and Alfred tricked them into coming out of their fort. When the Danes were too far from Reading to run back to its shelter, the Saxons forced them to fight.

At Ashdown, the Danes gathered on a hill around a thorn tree facing the Saxons. Ethelred went into a tent to hear mass before the battle. Alfred watched the Danes anxiously. They began to stir as if they were about to attack. He pleaded with Ethelred to leave the tent, but the king said God must come first. Alfred felt his

Saxons would have an advantage if they forced the fight. He could wait no longer.

Ordering his men to follow him, he charged the hill, snarling like a wild boar. A furious battle followed which lasted all day, but at night the Saxons were the winners. The sixteen-year old Secundarius was the hero of the day. However, Ashdown would be the last Saxon victory that year.

Driven from His Throne

The Danes kept attacking. It was clear they wanted to settle Wessex. Ethelred died shortly after another defeat by the Danes and Alfred became king.

Winter rolled around. The Saxons felt relieved. They had held their ground another year and the armies could now rest during the cold months. However, at Christmas in 871 the Danes made a surprise attack and drove Alfred out of Winchester. Only Alfred, his family, and a few followers escaped through the woods. They hid in a swamp on the isle of Athelny and Alfred planned his next move.

In the spring, he sent messengers across the land calling all Saxons to join him. Soon he had a large army.

The Saxons marched until they met the Danes at Ethandun. Again there was a fierce, day long battle. Near night, the Danes fled to a fort. Within a few days they were starving, pinned in by the Saxons. Alfred was strong enough to completely destroy them. Instead he invited them to make peace and become Christians. The Danes agreed. For twelve