

One night Johannes Gutenberg worked until very late at his press. He was printing a large folio edition of the Bible in Latin. For weeks he had given all his thoughts to this great work, and now he was completing the last sheets. He was worn out with fatigue, but proud of that which he had accomplished. He leaned his head upon the framework of his press, and gave himself up to thought.

Suddenly from among the types two voices were heard. They were speaking in low but earnest tones, and seemed to be talking about Gutenberg and his invention.

'Happy, happy man!' said the first voice, which was gentle and sweet and full of encouragement. 'Let him go on with the work he has begun. Books will now be plentiful and cheap. The poorest man can buy them. Every child will learn to read. The words of the wise and the good will be printed on thousands of sheets and carried all over the world. They will be read in every household. The age of ignorance will be at an end. Men will learn to think and know and act for themselves. They will no longer be the slaves of kings. And the name of Johannes Gutenberg, inventor of printing, will be remembered to the end of time.'

Then the other voice spoke. It was a stern, strong voice, although not unpleasant, and it spoke in tones of warning. 'Let Johannes Gutenberg beware of what he is doing. His invention will prove to be a curse rather than a blessing. It is true that books will be plentiful and cheap, but they will not all be good books. The words of the vulgar and the vile will also be printed. They will be carried into millions of households to poison the minds of children and to make men and women doubt the truth and despise virtue. Let Johannes Gutenberg beware lest he be remembered as one who brought evil into the world rather than good.'

And so the two voices went on, one claiming that the printing press would bless all mankind, the other saying that it would surely

prove to be a curse. Johannes Gutenberg felt much distressed. He did not know what to do. He thought of the great harm that might be done through the printing of bad books – how they would corrupt the minds of the innocent, how they would stir up the passions of the wicked.

Suddenly he seized a heavy hammer and began to break his press in pieces. ‘It shall not be said of me that I helped to make the world worse,’ he cried.

But as he was madly destroying that which had cost him so much pains to build, he heard a third voice. It seemed to come from the press itself, and it spoke in tones of sweet persuasion.

‘Think still again,’ it said, ‘and do not act rashly. The best of God’s gifts may be abused, and yet they are all good. The art of printing will enlighten the world. Its power for blessing mankind will be a thousand times greater than its power for doing harm. Hold your hand, Johannes Gutenberg, and remember that you are helping to make men better and not worse.’

The upraised hammer dropped from his hands. The sound of its striking the floor aroused him. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. He wondered if he had been dreaming.

*James Baldwin (adapted)*

Answer these questions.

1. What was Johannes Gutenberg's profession?
2. In which language was he printing an edition of the Bible?
3. Which voice said, 'The age of ignorance will be at an end': the first, the second or the third?
4. What was the message of the second voice?
5. What was the result of Gutenberg's choice to continue printing?
6. What is Gutenberg remembered as today?
7. What are the three possibilities that printing presented, as told to Gutenberg by the voices?
8. What do you think the voices really were?
9. Write a brief biography of Gutenberg using information from books and the internet.