

NOTES OF ADDRESSES

BY THE LATE

REV. WILLIAM C. BURNS,

MISSIONARY OF THE ENGLISH PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH TO CHINA.

EDITED BY

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PREFACE.

IT is no longer the ocean that separates us from WILLIAM BURNS. His last utterance in the comfortless little inn of New-chwang, "THINE IS THE KINGDOM, THE POWER, AND THE GLORY, FOR EVER AND EVER, AMEN," he repeats now in heaven at his Master's feet.

During the twenty years which he spent in China, nothing was more eagerly greeted by the eyes of the few friends, with whom he had time to correspond, than the sight, at considerable intervals, on the morning of mail day, of a letter from his hand. His consecration to the Master was so rare and so complete, during the years of his great work as an evangelist at home, that the sight of his handwriting reminded one to the last, that there are some who do illustrate the word, *Man's chief end is to glorify God*. The handwriting was unchanged by so many years constant use of his adopted and much-loved hieroglyphic, and the signature of his last letters was exactly that which he used to affix in his youth, to the tracts he gave to anxious inquirers, accompanied with the assurance of his interest and prayers.

In one of his letters he expressed gratitude for our having preserved and sought to circulate portions of his addresses.¹ He felt it to be "supplying his lack of service" to his own countrymen. It is a privilege now, by publishing a few of these addresses in a collected form, to keep his words from falling to the ground. It was more his habit to study his *subject* beforehand, than to compose his *sermon*, and his written style must not be judged of, by the notes of *extempore* speaking taken at the time without his knowledge. Yet these addresses, whatever they may have lost in their present form, are faithful memorials of days of awakening. Many will value them for their plain-spoken earnestness; and some will recognise in them the appeal of power—the arrow which the Lord sent home to bring them to the feet of Jesus.

Some of them are longer, because the speaker seemed compelled to press again and again on the vast audiences, assembled from great distances, the message of his Master. A few are short, having been compressed into the minutes which, in those days, working men could snatch, even during a snow-storm, from the breakfast-hour, to gather in the house of God around the open Bible. To how many a shop, or anvil, or clerk's desk, or attic, was then carried the manna portion, to be fed on there with joy, the Day will declare.

¹ A former series of "Addresses by the Rev. William C. Burns, from a Hearer's Notes," was published ten years ago.

The reader will bear in mind, that such was the desire to hear the word preached during the period when most of these addresses were delivered, that nine to twelve services were often held weekly. Extempore preaching alone could have adapted itself to embrace all the wants of the time.

The characteristics of the work of grace during the years 1839 to 1841, were thus noticed in an address from Mr Burns's own pen, bearing date September 1. 1841:—

“Perhaps you have heard of the wonderful things which the great God has been doing for us in Scotland. The servants of Satan have reviled God's blessed work; and I wish to tell you something of the truth about it. You know that many people come from the church the same as they went to it; the Word does not touch their consciences, and they remain under the power of sin and Satan, of death and hell! This used to be very much the way among us until lately; but the God of love has visited us, and poured out his life-giving Spirit upon the dead souls of men. In some places you might see the solemn sight of hundreds weeping for their sins, and seeking to give up their hearts to Jesus. And, ah! what a sweet change has taken place on many! The high looks of the proud have been brought down; dead formalists have become living Christians; worshippers of Mammon have been changed into lovers of God; the blasphemous tongues of the profane have been made to sing God's praise; drunkards have cast from them the cup of devils, and have taken the cup of salvation; unclean persons, who used to be the slaves of lust, the drudges of the devil, the very dregs of humankind, are now sitting at the feet of Jesus; and some, who were ringleaders in every form of sin, are now bold and open, and unflinching in the service of Christ, even as they once were shameless, brazen-faced, and steel-hearted in the service of the wicked One. Many, who formerly were dead in sin, are now living in the grace of Jesus, in the love of God, in the communion of the Spirit, and in the hope of heaven!”

At the present time, when many are stirred up to lay hold on the God of Pentecost, there is a special interest and pleasure in looking back to those days of his right hand,—days which, during succeeding times of deadness, it became almost saddening to recall.

The instruments then employed were ever made to feel, that the entire power which accompanied the word resided in God the Holy Ghost, honoured as the living Jehovah, specially addressed in believing prayer, and shed forth in glorious power. Mr Burns was only in his twenty-fifth year in 1839-40, and did indeed ascribe all the glory of the effects of his preaching

to God alone. The written word was magnified. Sometimes inquirers would tell that what had been used to awaken them was the scripture read or the psalm sung. The sanctuary was felt to be the house of God indeed. Reasons and excuses for absence, at other times insurmountable, how quickly they gave way! Daily labour was got over in time; and through the winter dark, or by the moonlight on the snow, eager hundreds were pressing to its gates; some still like burdened CHRISTIAN, others rejoicing in the Saviour newly found, and careless ones, who came from curiosity alone, had to sit and think, silent and still, for an hour in the crowd, till the service began. That solemn stillness was often followed by such requests for prayer as those which have become so common now,—believers asking prayer for unconverted relatives, and awakened sinners asking it for themselves.

And when summer saw the services transferred to country and remote highland districts, like scenes were witnessed, like work was done. Not in churches, for these would have contained but a small portion of the listeners, but on the mountain side the gathered thousands worshipped. One ferryboat on one occasion had carried eight hundred hearers across the water by breakfast time. From a circuit of twenty miles they came. And the half-reaped harvest fields deserted on bright September afternoons, told that men and women, employers and employed, were intent on the momentous issues of that seed time for eternity.

The world outside called it a passing excitement. Many within the church stood doubtingly aloof, noting all defects, and saying, “Will it last?” Very faithfully were inquirers themselves warned, that everything about the work which had its rise in man only, must pass away; while all that was divine *must* last and outlive the grave, being sealed at death and confirmed at the judgment. The young among them were pointed to the fair blossom of 1840, covering the fruit trees, and asked, were we to come back in autumn and count the ripe apples, how few would they be in comparison of the blossom that cold winds will nip and blow down?” Or, away among the mountains, “Look at the young seedlings in the thick plantations, and say how many of them will stand in the forest of a hundred years.”

But the question, “Did it last?” needs not to be repeated now. Deathbeds have answered it, lives have proved it, its fruits have been carried away and tested on many a distant shore; and the district visitor, going the patient rounds of now nearly thirty years, has discovered, for hopeful converts fallen away, many more, who, unheard of in the day of revival, date impressions back to that time of blessing. A question nearer to the point might be, Does the God of the spirits of all flesh ever draw near to visit a congregation

or a community without lasting fruits being produced, without leaving each soul, who comes under the influence or hears the report of it around, either awakened and quickened, or blighted and hardened? “I will be as the dew unto Israel: his branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree and his smell as Lebanon.” “They knew not that I healed them.” “Master, behold the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.”

Since 1847 Mr. Burns laboured among the Chinese, to whom he found free access, even in districts where the protection of treaty did not reach; wearing their own costume, and possessed of several of their dialects, he was free to do the work of a pioneer. God did wondrously, in some places, own the labours of His servant there; but in others, he was made to feel how sovereign, in His working, is the life-giving Spirit, and urgently to call on believers, for earnest and persevering prayer.

May it please the Master, a second time to bless these comments on His own Word, and to stir up believers to remember before God the devoted missionaries who still in China stand face to face with an almost unbroken heathenism! May it not be humbly hoped that some who read this little volume, may be led to inquire how far they can aid in the work of that mission field, and by persevering, true prayer, hasten on the day when the Stone cut out without hands, the Corner Stone of Israel, shall smite the image of China’s idolatry?

At a meeting of the China Mission, recently held in Edinburgh, the following tribute to Mr. Burns was paid by the Rev. James Johnston, formerly his fellow-labourer in China:—

“From the nature of the work for which he was specially qualified, and to which he entirely gave himself,—that of a pioneer or Evangelist,—he could not expect to reap the fruits himself. His work was to break up the ground and sow the seed, not to gather the harvest. No man in this age, so far as we know, has so entirely devoted himself to this self-denying work.

“Again and again has our departed brother laboured for years in some dark and unpromising field, and just when the first streak of dawn appeared on the horizon, he would leave another to enjoy the glorious sun-rise, while he buried himself in some other region sunk in heathen darkness. Again and again have we seen him thus, in prayers and tears, sowing the precious seed, and as soon as he saw the green shoots appear above the dark soil, he would leave to others the arduous yet happy task of reaping the harvest, and begin his appointed work in breaking up the fallow ground. The full extent of his great life-work will not be known until that day, when ‘he that soweth and he that reapeth shall rejoice together.’

“The faith and patience of this devoted servant of God is an example to the Church, and to every labourer in the Lord’s vineyard, teaching us not to live upon the stimulus

of a present success, even in the conversion of souls. No man enjoyed so great success as he did, or thirsted for the salvation of sinners with more intense longing than he, yet have we seen him labouring for seven years, according to his own testimony, without seeing one soul brought to Christ; yet labouring on only with increased diligence and prayer, until he saw, as he shortly did, the awakening at Peh-Chuia, which reminded him of Kilsyth. His influence in this way has been extended over a larger field; and with his strongly-marked individuality, he left the impress of his character and piety wherever he went. Missionaries felt it, and blessed God for even a casual acquaintance with William Burns; converts felt it, and have been heard to say, that they got their idea of what the Saviour was on earth, from the holy calm, and warm love, and earnest zeal of Mr Burns' walk with God. We bow to our Father's will in his removal on the 4th of April.

“His grave stands on the borders of the great kingdom of Manchuria, the advanced post of Christian conquests, beyond the northern limits of China, with the following inscription, in his own words:—

To the Memory
OF THE
REV. WM. C. BURNS, A.M.,
MISSIONARY TO THE CHINESE
FROM THE
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN ENGLAND.
BORN AT DUN, SCOTLAND, APRIL 1ST, 1815.
ARRIVED IN CHINA, NOVEMBER 1847.
DIED AT PORT OF NEW-CHWANG, APRIL 4TH, 1868.

II. Corinthians: V. Chap.

“The little mound casts its shadow over many lands; for where is Burns not loved and mourned? But his life is the Church's legacy, and loudly calls to self-sacrifice and devotion to the cause of Christ, and especially the cause of missions. His indomitable spirit beckons us to the field of conflict and of victory, while his four last converts, the conquest of his death-bed, stand like sentinels by his grave, and long for the advance of the Church's hosts.”

BONSKEID, *December 1868.*