

Life and Labours
OF
DUNCAN MATHESON,

THE SCOTTISH EVANGELIST.

BY THE
REV. JOHN MACPHERSON.

“REALITY IS THE GREAT THING: I HAVE ALWAYS SOUGHT REALITY.”

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CHAPTER II.

HIS YOUTH AND CONVERSION.

The time had arrived when Duncan Matheson, now sixteen years of age, must decide as to his future calling. His education was good for his years, his talents were of a superior order, and he might have entered the University with the fairest prospects. But fond as he was of learning, and ambitious of rising in the world, the conditions attached to his enjoyment of a college education were such as he could not accept. He was unconverted, and he would not be a minister because he could not be a hypocrite. His novel-reading had set him a dreaming; he would become a sculptor. The mallet and chisel were his fascination; Rome and the ancient masters rose before the eye of fancy; and visions of success and glory dazzled his view. But how is he to climb so lofty a steep? He boldly resolves to plant his foot on the lowest possible round of the ladder: he will begin his career of fame as a stone-cutter. His general talents, and in particular his turn for mechanics, seemed to mark him out for the occupation of a builder. Accordingly he was apprenticed to a master, and sent to hew his native sandstone at Kildrummie, where he wrote his first letter to his friends at Huntly. Here, as he tells, romance is quickly changed for reality. At the end of six months the stone-hewing is exhausted, and his master sends him to the quarry. This is going down the ladder, not up; and here his apprenticeship ends. From Kildrummie he goes to Banff, where his quick parts procure him employment in the building of a bank. He saves all he can of his wages; and although his mother needs not his aid, his affectionate heart finds an unspeakable joy in sending her all his savings.

Whilst he is hewing stones the Divine Worker is busy with mallet and chisel of sharp conviction and providential dealing upon his rough granite nature. He would be a sculptor, a builder, a worker of great works. The Master of all masters had another design, a better way, and was even now rough-hewing this proud spirit, and training the young tradesman to be a sculptor of souls and a builder of God's temple. There is no rest in the young man's spirit; he will not have religion, and yet he cannot do without it. He goes to hear the late estimable minister of Banff, Mr. Grant. The subject of discourse is "A good man." Matheson is convinced by a clear statement of the truth that no man can be really good, good in the sight of God, who is not regenerate. He next goes to hear the venerable John Murker, minister of the Independent Church in the same town. The preacher is that day reasoning, like Paul, on temperance, righteousness, and judgment to come. Trembling under the word, the young stone-cutter goes away resolved to hear the faithful preacher no more. He then turns his steps to the

neighbouring town of Macduff, and listens for a season to Mr. Leslie, the late earnest and devoted minister of the Free Church; but in vain. What he really sought for, though he did not know it, was a Gospel that would give him rest without repentance, and salvation without a sacrifice of self.

Work failing he returned home, bade farewell to his father's house, and carrying with him the counsels and prayers of his mother, who was then in declining health, he went to Edinburgh. Here he lodged with a godly couple, who he says did all they could for his soul. The providential hammer and chisel were again at work, and the Spirit of grace plied him in various ways. He must needs sit under the most faithful ministry he can find, and accordingly goes to hear Mr. Moody Stuart. No sooner is he seated than a lady enters the same pew, and leaning her head on the book-board engages in secret prayer. Matheson is self-condemned; conscience upbraids him for his prayerlessness. He is now at the preacher's mercy; the truth spoken with faithful plainness and holy fervour deepens his unrest into anguish, and he goes away saying to himself, "I cannot bear this; if I am to come here, I must be converted." The evil spirit of unbelief triumphed; he resolved to return to that church no more. During the rest of the summer he entered no place of worship, but spent his Sabbaths in walking abroad and in novel-reading. He dared not open the Bible; the very sight of it pierced his heart with an indescribable pang. He tried hard to avoid everything suggestive of eternity. Daily did he flee from the presence of the Lord; and often did he rebelliously banish from his mind the thoughts by which the Holy Spirit was striving to draw him to the Saviour.

His fellow-workmen were for the most part Godless, drunken, and dissipated in the extreme. But he was preserved from joining in their follies; he never once could be induced to enter a public-house; and he was often shocked and saddened at the terrible miseries which these free-thinkers and free-livers were constantly bringing on themselves. If the fear of God did not restrain him, he remembered the prayers, the counsels, and the tears of his mother. When about to err, her gentle reproof sounded in his ear. In his sleep he seemed to see her beckoning him to the way of righteousness; and when all else failed, one monitor never failed effectually to warn him away from the gates of evil; that monitor was the remembrance of his mother's hollow and ominous cough. It is told of Simon Peter that throughout his life the hearing of a cock crow at any hour, and under all circumstances, caused him to burst into tears. Such was the power of that one look of love that melted the sinning disciple's heart and reclaimed the wanderer. By how little a thing can God hold fast a strong man, and accomplish a great work! From the day he parted with his mother till the day of his death, Duncan Matheson, manly and brave-hearted though he was, could never hear the cough of the consumptive without being deeply moved. The cords of love

twined by a parent's hand around his heart he could not undo; and it may be safely asserted that except the grace of God nothing is more powerful than the wise affection of a mother.

One night he was induced by his fellow-workmen to go to an infidel meeting; but just as he was about to enter the room he remembered that the eye of God was upon him, he seemed to hear his mother's counsel, and her dying cough. It was enough. He suddenly stopped, turned back, fled from the place, and went home.

When, many years afterwards, he sought for his former companions in toil, he found that "most of them filled a drunkard's grave; not one of them was known to have turned to God." Well might he exclaim, as he did, "Oh, the wondrous grace of God to me!"

Although careful of his morals, he hated all close dealing about his soul. This was the sore part which could not bear to be touched. On one occasion he met a faithful Baptist minister, who put the "one thing needful" plainly before him; but young Matheson adroitly shifted the ground by raising the question of Infant Baptism, which proved a too successful diversion from the great question.

In October, 1845, he was called home to see his mother die. The last year of her life was the brightest; she had reached Pisgah and could see the Land of Promise. She spoke to her son of Christ; entreated him to follow the Saviour; and charged him to meet her in heaven. Taking his hand in hers she bade him farewell, and then gently fell asleep in Jesus. Again, in the hour of grief divine love assailed the stubborn heart, but as yet the only result was a resolution to arise and seek the Lord. The noblest affections of our nature, and the bitterest sorrow of life, alike and unitedly fail to bring sinners to the Saviour.

After building a house for his father and the family, he returned to Edinburgh with a strange impression, of which he spake to his friends, that either he should die or be converted there. Thus the all-wise and gracious Spirit condescends to seek admission into our evil hearts by the lowest door. By putting before us the alternative of death or life, he appeals to our self-interest and our fears, if by any means He may obtain a footing within us for the furtherance of his merciful design.

In Edinburgh he strove to forget his good resolutions, and went on much as before, guarding his morals, shutting out conviction, and making no surrender to the Lord Jesus. Bent on professional success, he gave himself to the study of drawing and the acquisition of useful knowledge, with praiseworthy diligence improving his mind. To keep his thoughts occupied, and his heart quiet, he resorted to Freemasonry, which, as he acknowledged, did his conscience no good; for he found the freedom not such as he needed, and the secret no substitute for the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

One day a discussion on the evidences of the truth of Christianity arose among the stone-cutters. Duncan Matheson was the champion of the Bible. The leading sceptic, beaten in argument, assailed religion through the inconsistencies of its friends, declaring that Matheson was the only consistent Christian he had ever met. This compliment to his external morality, instead of pleasing his vanity, aroused his conscience, and he secretly charged himself with sheer hypocrisy in defending the truth, to whose divine power he felt in his heart he was an utter stranger. Another day, seeing a fellow-workman look sad, he expressed his sympathy, and found the man was distressed about his sins. Matheson took him aside, and although himself ignorant of the righteousness of God, and justification by faith in the Lord Jesus, directed him as best he could to the path of life. But this act recoiled on himself, and his conscience, now constantly awake, began to upbraid him. "You're a hypocrite," said he to himself. "You point others to Christ, and all the while you are treading the way to hell yourself." Then followed a fierce struggle between light and darkness; his soul was tortured almost to madness—a crisis was at hand.

His state at this time is by no means uncommon. On the one hand his conscience enlightened by the law of God suffered him not to plunge into the pleasures of the world, whilst on the other hand he knew not the peace of God. He could not forget God, and when he remembered God he was troubled. Poised between heaven and earth, as it were, he had religion enough to make him careful and sad, but not enough to make him holy and happy. Into infidelity he dared not plunge. Two convictions, like two unseen hands, held him fast. The one, firm belief in regeneration as a great fact essential to salvation; the other, an undoubted consciousness that he was not born again. As yet, however, regeneration, if an acknowledged necessity, seemed a dark and uninviting mystery. Thorns and briars of the wilderness were now to be his teachers. He was to learn the way of salvation in a fire that consumes everything but truth. Let us hear his own story.

"On Thursday, 25th Oct., 1846, being the fast-day before communion, I attended Lady Glenorchy's church, where I heard Mr. A. Bonar, biographer of M'Cheyne, preach on the portion of the wicked in Psalm xi., 'Upon the wicked He shall rain snares, fire, and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup.' I felt as he proceeded as if all were to myself: I dreaded the portion I was about to receive. I knew I deserved it. I left the church weeping, but tried to hush my fears by fostering in my mind a purpose of being converted that day twelve months. I had the notion that I could be converted when I liked: I had only to begin praying, and reading, etc., and then all would come right. Fatal delusion! There are gales of mercy, there are tides of grace, which do not always wait for us. It will always be man's inconvenient season when it is God's convenient time. I

was afraid to return to the church in the evening. Satan furnished me with a pillow on which to sleep. It was this: 'If you are to be converted you will be converted; If not, you cannot help it.' I took the opiate greedily, and was rocked to sleep in the devil's cradle.

"Many strike on this rock; many a noble ship has been dashed to pieces here. This is not Calvinism, but fatalism. Can the husbandman expect to reap if he does not sow, or the sailor reach the port if he does not spread the sail to catch the breeze? What sick man would say, 'If I am to get well I shall, no matter though a physician be not called or medicine taken.' Of all preachers of election, Satan is the worst. He distorts that glorious truth, the first link in the golden chain of man's salvation. He hides the blood of Christ through which sinners should behold it. He keeps out of sight the only decree with which sinners have to do, viz., 'He that believeth not shall be damned.' 'You are not elect,' said the adversary to a sorely-trying Christian. 'Elect!' replied the man of God. 'Have you seen the book of God? Liar, get you hence; I have had more than ye ever had—an offer of Jesus Christ, and I have taken Him.'

"Next day I was sad, and unable to smile; but I tried to conceal my state. Sermon after sermon rose to mind, and my dying mother's counsels flashed into my heart. When the church bells began to ring on Saturday, two fellow-workmen, G. T. and M. T., infidels, began to curse and swear, blaspheming especially the Lord's Supper. Shocked, I could have fled from the place; and the prayer came into my heart, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' Then a voice seemed to say, 'How do you take the name of Father into your lips, seeing you reject Christ? Your hell will be deeper than theirs; for you know, and do not. God is not your Father: Satan is.'

"I could work no more, and I went home to ponder and weep. The arrow was driven home; and this time I did not seek to withdraw it. On Sabbath morning I was early astir, and, Bible in hand, was the first at church. In serving a table, Mr. Bonar said, 'This is a feast of love, the deepest love.' A voice seemed to ask me, 'Why are you not at it?' My heart was thrilled. I looked round, and saw no one. The question drove me from the church, and I rushed home. Even in this solemn hour I dared daily with my convictions, and went to see a friend, resolved to shun the church lest I should be tormented afresh. My heart was too full to conceal my thoughts, and I began to speak about religion. The topic being manifestly disagreeable, I left the house with feelings of wounded pride. Reaching the Calton Hill, I looked down upon the city, with its thousands of gleaming lights, and upward to the stars, which seemed to shine most sweetly upon me. I felt inwardly urged to go to church. I went with reluctance, and almost not knowing what I was doing, or whither I was going. I became desperate and passed the church door, but returned as if some invisible power moved me against my will.

Again, when I was about to enter, I tore myself away. Two powers seemed to be lugging me hither and thither. Again I returned, and with a bound crossed the threshold, and mounting the gallery stairs took my seat in the passage. I felt I was a poor, miserable castaway. The sermon was nearly finished. One showed me the text: ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty’ (Ex. xxxiv. 6, 7). Mr. A. Bonar was preacher, and had come to the words, ‘will by no means clear the guilty.’ In a moment I felt the burning, piercing eye of God upon me. A mountain of wrath seemed to crush me down; and hell was opened beneath me. All round about me seemed to be on fire. Louder than the loudest thunder came the words: ‘By no means clear the guilty;’ and, ‘Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.’ The congregation was dismissed; the people departed; but I remained fixed to the spot. Some as they passed gave me a look of pity. At last I rose and reeled home to my lodgings, realizing with awful vividness God, heaven, hell, judgment, and eternity. Falling on my knees I uttered my first real prayer, ‘God be merciful to me, a sinner.’ I was now thoroughly awakened, but I was not saved.

“When the eyes are opened by the Holy Ghost, how differently are all things seen: they stand forth then in their true light. I saw the mass around me hurrying unsaved to eternity. I wondered they could laugh. It seemed to me like the condemned dancing on the scaffold. The heavens seemed as if clothed in sackcloth. Wherever I went I felt the burning eye of God upon me; and the threatenings of the Word came like peals of artillery in quick succession. I feared I should drop into hell at every step, and, like most other awakened sinners, I began to work for life. The language of my heart was, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay Thee all.’ How I did pray, and agonize, and suffer! I was on the wrong track, and did not know that

“‘Doing is a deadly thing,
Doing ends in death.’”

I began to read many chapters, thinking that would do me good. I prayed all day long, but I was no better. If a tear started to my eye I felt proud of it, and thought surely now Jesus will regard my case. I had a long stair of seventy steps to climb to my room: at every step I uttered a prayer. Like Luther as he ascended the steps in the church at Rome, I groaned out a petition for deliverance; but no voice came to me saying, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ I laboured to make of my works a ladder to heaven. I put my anxiety in place of Christ; and instead of seeking the One to be believed in, I set out in

search of faith. Many a weary hour I spent trying to discover what faith is. I read all the books I could find, and searched the Word of God. Faith! faith! faith! was still my cry. Oh, if I had faith! The Star of Bethlehem was shining brightly before me. Jesus was standing near. He was uttering his voice, 'Look unto Me, and be ye saved.' But I passed Him by.

"I went to a minister in Edinburgh, who began to tell me how good a thing it was to be awakened, and, with a view to my being comforted, applied passages of Scripture that belong only to the people of God. He urged me to hope, instead of bidding me believe. Thus many are led to hope they may be saved, and rest there, instead of obeying the command of God to 'believe on Him whom He hath sent.' The effect was, I became proud of my convictions; my fears were hushed; for some days I felt great self-satisfaction; and, thinking that He who had begun a good work would carry it on, went smoothly.

"Some days after this I was startled by finding my heart beginning to love things I had forsaken, and then came the terrible question, 'What if this is false peace? I felt I had not taken hold of Christ, and something said, Now or never! now or never! Make sure work for eternity"

How few can deal with anxious souls! Here was a good man settling me on my lees, taking the children's bread and giving it to a dog. He had no right to give me any promise addressed to the children of God. The promises are all yea and amen, but only in Christ Jesus. From Genesis to Revelation the promises belong to the Christian: they are his in Christ. Many have gone down to hell, pillowing their head on a promise, but not taking Christ. The good man was wrong in applying to me the text, 'Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil. i. 6); for it refers to the work of sanctification, and as yet I was not justified.

"Mr. Cowie used to say, 'Some get such a fright at Sinai that they are in danger of running past Jerusalem;' that is to say, the very depth of their convictions may prevent them from entering the kingdom, for fear their peace may not be right. So it was with me. Fearing lest I should come short of eternal life, I cared not what happened if only I might be really saved.

"I sought my old friend John Cameron, who wept in his sympathy with me, and took me to his minister, Christopher Anderson (Baptist), author of the 'Annals of the English Bible.' This devoted man listened to my story, told in a romantic style; for I spoke of my sufferings as if I was passing through purgatorial fires. He saw I was lifted up, and said, 'Young man, were I to say I am pleased with you, you would go down that stair in a happy frame, but you are yet far from the kingdom of God. You have never yet dealt with the justice of God. His justice in condemning you for breaking his law has never yet entered your thoughts. I see you are angry

with God for not giving you salvation as the reward of works. But it must be grace from first to last.’ After a few words he told me to go. I thought it very harsh. I seemed cut off from all hope. I reeled to the door, and when I reached the street I felt shut up to God and alone with him, and exclaimed, ‘O God, it shall henceforth be Thee, and Thee alone.’ After this I desired that everything might be settled between God and myself, and I prayed that every truth might be burnt into my heart by the Holy Ghost.

“Wearied and anxious, I left for home. A great change was seen in me. My fierce temper was checked: the lion had thus far become a lamb. All the town heard of it, and pitied the poor lad who had, as they thought, gone mad. Old companions who I feared would hinder me never came near me. Faith was still the prevailing question. The doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin I could not see, and I rebelled against the sovereignty of God, and thought He dealt hardly with me. Slowly the truth in regard to imputation was opened up. Dimly I began to see that I had nothing but unholy thoughts, words, or deeds, and that for these I must die. I saw that Jesus only had holy thoughts, words, and deeds, and that these were placed to my account the moment I believed. I wanted a righteousness in which I could appear before God, and slowly Jehovah-Tsidkenu, the Lord Himself our Righteousness, shone forth in all his glory.

“I was standing on the 10th December, 1846, at the end of my father’s house, and meditating on that precious word which has brought peace to countless weary ones; ‘God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life’ (John iii. 16). I saw that God loved me, for I was one of the world. I saw the proof of His love in the giving of His Son Jesus. I saw that ‘whosoever’ meant anybody and everybody, and therefore *me, even me*. I saw the result of believing—that I would not perish, but have everlasting life. I was enabled to take God at his word. I saw no one, but Jesus only, all in all in redemption. My burden fell from my back, and I was saved. Yes, saved! That hour angels rejoiced over one more sinner brought to the Saviour, and new songs rang through the courts of that city to which I had now got a title, and of which I had now become an heir. Bunyan describes his pilgrim as giving three leaps for joy as his burden rolled into the open sepulchre of Christ. I could not contain myself for joy. I sang the new song, salvation through the blood of the Lamb. The very heavens appeared as if covered with glory. I felt the calm of a pardoned sinner; yet I had no thought about my safety. I saw only the person of Jesus. I wept for my sin that had nailed Him to the cross, and they were tears of true repentance. Formerly I had set up repentance as a toll between me and the cross; now it came freely as the tear that faith wept. I felt I had passed from death unto life—that old things had passed away, and all things had become new.

“I wondered I had stumbled at the simplicity of the way. I saw everything so plain that I longed to go and tell all the world. I felt as if I could at once convince the most sceptical and the most hardened; and that if I met a thousand Manassehs I could say, ‘Yet there is room.’ I went everywhere, telling my glad story. Some even of the saints looked incredulous. Others, like the elder brother in the parable, did not like the music and the dancing. They had never left their Father’s dwelling; they had never been sin-sick, and knew not what it is to be healed; no fatted calf had been killed for them. These warned me against enthusiasm, and exhorted me to be sober-minded. One old man told me I was on the mount, but would soon be down again. Another said I needed great humility; but I went on singing my song. ‘Prayer had given place to praise, and night and day for more than three days I continued to thank God for his unspeakable gift.’ I longed to die that I might sin no more, and discover more fully the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of that love which I now knew passeth knowledge.”