

Life and Labours  
OF  
DUNCAN MATHESON,

*THE SCOTTISH EVANGELIST.*

BY THE  
REV. JOHN MACPHERSON.

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

New Edition.

LONDON: MORGAN AND SCOTT  
(OFFICE of “The Christian.”)  
12, PATERNOSTER BUILDINGS. E.C.  
*And may be ordered by any bookseller.*

1876.

## CHAPTER IV.

### *HIS EVANGELISTIC APPRENTICESHIP.*

“Son, go work today in my vineyard.”—*Matt.* xxi. 28.

“**W**hy stand ye here all the day idle?” This question could not have been appropriately addressed to Duncan Matheson at any period of his Christian life. Immediately on his conversion he began to labour for the salvation of souls. At first his light was small; but he kept trimming his lamp both for his own and others’ good, and the flame increased. Every effort of faith and sacrifice of love seemed to add live coals to his altar of fire. For twenty years the flame of zeal was never suffered to expire; no, not for a single day. Night and day, in season and out of season, he strove with all his might to win souls.

His first attempt was at Burntisland, where the minister of the Free Church kindly gave him the use of the school, and otherwise encouraged him. He began by wisely conjoining the temporal with the spiritual, making the former subservient to the latter. Having acquired proficiency in drawing, he offered gratuitously to teach his fellow-workmen. The class was opened and closed with prayer and reading of the Word. His interest in the temporal well-being of the workmen was genuine; but he cared chiefly for their souls. While they were learning to draw sketches, he was striving to save sinners; while they studied architectural plans, he was brooding over plans for their salvation. Here he reaped one of the less pleasant fruits of doing good. One of the class obtaining the use of Matheson’s drawing instruments, disappeared with the ill-gotten spoil, and the benevolent teacher was left at a great loss. He was vexed, but nothing daunted. Throughout his life he invariably set himself to promote in every possible way the earthly welfare of his fellowmen; and this he did not merely as a means to the highest end, the saving of souls, but because it was his duty and his joy. Frequently, when he had spent all his earnings in charity, did he go about and solicit aid for the poor. Sometimes he was known to go amongst the neighbours and beg a scuttleful of coals, carry them to the cheerless home of the destitute sick, with his own hands make a fire, and then prepare the “cup that cheers but not inebriates,” procured at the expense of his own last shilling. Only after the poor, forlorn, bedridden, solitary one was refreshed did he take his Bible from his pocket to read, and pray, and speak of Jesus and salvation. “I never believed,” he says, “in speaking sweet words and honeyed counsels to starving people. If you want to do them good, go to them with a loaf in one hand and the Bible in the other. Actions speak louder than words.”

About this time he succeeded in preventing a strike. His sympathy with the men, his manly frankness, his judicious counsel and weight of character,

were, by the blessing of God sought for in prayer, entirely successful. He felt he obtained his reward in the evils thus averted and in the harmony restored between masters and men. He found the Gospel to be the true remedy of every woe. Jesus is indeed Jehovah-rophi.

Returning to Huntly, he began with all his energy and enthusiasm to make known the Saviour he had found. Every hour was spent in visiting the sick and distributing tracts. His efforts were not confined to his native town. Everywhere in the neighbouring parishes he sought his way with more or less success. Hitherto he had confined his evangelistic services to prayer, reading the word and conversation; but the time had arrived when he must take a step in advance. One day Miss Macpherson, a devoted Christian, who had been his friend, counsellor, and good angel throughout the period of his protracted spiritual conflict, requested him to address a company of aged women whom she had gathered together. Matheson declined the invitation. He "could not preach." Miss M. reasoned, urged, and entreated; but all in vain. Finally, demanding what he would answer at the great tribunal for a neglected talent, she charged him not to refuse lest souls should perish in consequence. This was more than he could bear. He went to the meeting, though with the greatest hesitancy and fear. Opening the Bible at Isaiah xxiii. 11, "Tremble, ye women that are at ease; be troubled, ye careless ones," he spoke with great freedom and power. Both the text and matter of his address seemed to be laid to his hand; and such were the results that he felt assured the Lord was calling him to this work. The Christian lady, who by her wisdom and faithfulness was instrumental in calling into exercise a gift of inestimable value, little knew at that time the greatness of the service she was rendering to the Church and the world.

From this time onwards to the end of his days he found at once his greatest labour and his chief joy in preaching Christ. In a short space of time he established a great many cottage meetings, which he carried on with uncommon vigour and success. Solemn events occurred. One night our evangelist addressed a meeting on the parable of the ten virgins. A woman deeply impressed, went home, and spent a night of sleepless anxiety. Early in the morning she called her neighbour to go and fetch Duncan Matheson. As the messenger left the house a great crash was heard: the anxious inquirer had dropped dead. "While they went to buy, the Bridegroom came."

A man, in whose house Matheson held a meeting, taking offence at the word, informed the evangelist that the next meeting would be the last under his roof. The young servant of Christ was deeply grieved, and prayed much for an appropriate subject of final address. One text took hold of his mind, and he could not get rid of it. Accordingly he preached on the solemn and touching words of the Lord Jesus: "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace? but now they are

hid from thine eyes.” At the close the evangelist shook hands with the master of the house, and said, “Prepare to meet thy God.” The ark of the Lord was thrust out, and the ark-bearer with it. Next day the man, when drinking with his companions in the public-house, suddenly fell dead. These providential visitations served to deepen the impression made by the word. Great power accompanied the preaching, the people were seen running home from the place of meeting in a state of great alarm.

The Duchess of Gordon, hearing of young Matheson’s zealous and successful labours, sent for him and offered to employ him as missionary at a salary of forty pounds a year. Hitherto he had maintained himself; but his means were now exhausted. His worldly prospects were indeed bright. His skill as a builder, his energy, enterprising spirit, business talents, and moral integrity, held out the promise of position and wealth; but he cheerfully turned his back on honour and gain, and betook himself amidst opposition and scorn to build the walls of Jerusalem. Being now fully possessed by the great passion of his life, the saving of souls, worldly considerations were with him of small account. The offer of the Duchess was accepted. He went to work with all his might. Although he never received more than the small salary named he spent a large proportion of it in the purchase of tracts, and in the relief of the poor; and this noble and generous practice he followed whilst he lived.

His strength was great, and he often worked sixteen hours a day. Sinners were converted, and he was filled with joy. Often, however, no success attended his labours; but although cast down and led to humble himself at the sight of souls perishing in their wilful rejection of Christ, he learned many a useful lesson. Some men, he observed, concealed a hard heart beneath “a thick coat of evangelical varnish.” They assented to all he said, but repented not. He watched them at the last hour of life, and saw them die without giving one sign of grace. There were no bands in their death; their strength was firm. He concluded that there is no more dangerous delusion than the confidence begotten by a mere “head knowledge,” or intellectual faith.

He frequently visited the old Christians who had been disciples of Mr. Cowie, and in his intercourse with them learned several useful lessons. One of these pilgrims was Isobel Chrystie, then upwards of ninety years of age. “Come awa, my son David,” said Isobel to the missionary one day as he entered her humble cot. “Perhaps,” was his reply, “the hands are the hands of Esau, but the voice is Jacob’s. How do you know that I am not a hypocrite?” “Ah,” said she, “d’ye think I dinna ken the breath o’ a true Christian?” The Rose of Sharon may lie hid in the believer’s bosom, but its fragrance cannot be concealed from others. “We octet to lay down our lives for the brithren; an’ hoo could we dee for them if we dinna ken them?” So thought Isobel Chrystie. When in the course of conversation allusion was made to the sal-

vation of the dying thief, she rattled her little staff on the floor and said, "That was a gey trophy to gang throw the gowden gates o' heaven. I'm thinkin' there was a gey steer amo' the angels; but nave o' them would try to pit him oot. Na, na; Christ brocht him ben." When Isobel lay dying she was unable to recognize minister, missionary, friend, or neighbour. To each inquiry she still replied, "I dinna ken you." At last the question was put to her, "Isobel, d'ye ken Christ?" The countenance of the dying saint brightened at the sound of her Saviour's name. Looking up with a smile she promptly replied, "That I do, but nae sae muckle as I would like, and will do by an' by." That night the aged believer went to be with Him whom she remembered and knew when all others were forgotten and unknown.

A dying saint of the same generation gave him this pithy advice: "Hand in wi' Christ; whatever happens, aye think weel o' God; and tak' care o' yersel'; for, ye ken, a breath dims a polished shaft."

Another Christian, ere passing away, charged him to warn the believers against "razing the foundations." "I often did it," she said; "I rashly denied the Spirit's work in my soul, and I have paid dearly for it." This she said in reference to the excessive and morbid retrospection in which some Christians indulge, to the hurt of their souls and the discredit of the Gospel. They pull up faith by the roots to see if it is growing. They pluck out their eyes to see if those eyes are genuine. Peace and joy depart from them. Dark suspicions of God, as if He watched for their halting, overshadow their hearts, and they are plunged into misery. Growth in grace becomes impossible; for, as one has said, "kindly thoughts of God lie at the root of sanctification." Self-examination is important; but surely not less important is faith. Looking into the heart and looking out to Christ should go together. The pilot at once keeps his eye upon the compass and his hand upon the helm: if he neglected either he would speedily lose his course. "Keeping the heart" must be coupled with "holding the Head." "Examine thyself" should never be separated from "looking unto Jesus." The best way of testing the pitcher of our faith is by dipping it often in the Well of Life and drawing its fill for constant use.

In the journal of his missionary labours he kept a minutely detailed account of every visit and conversation, and his impressions of the people. This record, large enough to fill a volume, was written with perfect accuracy and fastidious care, and serves to illustrate the *thoroughness* that always characterized the man and his work. Plainly too it appears from this diary that in simplicity and godly sincerity did he bring before every man, woman, and child, the things of their peace. As usual, he found two classes, viz., the few that are open to conviction, and the many that entrench themselves behind their own righteousness. One refuses to make any sign in regard to personal religion, and he is silenced by silence. The candle will not burn for

want of air. Another agrees with everything the missionary says, and in that panoply of perfect formalism no joint is found. The candle burns, but it is in the presence of the dead. A third “will not speak of his religion to any man, because it is a matter between himself and God;” to which the missionary bluntly replies that if he had true religion it would make him speak, for he would seek communion with men of like mind, and out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. Some men conceal their religion as they would a scab. Eloquent about the merest trifle, they have nothing to say for Christ. These are the devil’s dummies. Another, a middle-aged matron, receives him kindly, but is at first shy and reserved. His quaint, ingenuous, spirit-stirring talk quickly unlocks the good woman’s heart, and she begins to tell him that she “fears she is mair o’ a hypocrite than a Christian, for she canna see hoo a child o’ God could hae sae muckle indwallin’ sin as she has: but still she daurna deny that she canna do without prayer, that she has a gey to God’s Word, an a warm hert to God’s children, and a terrible fear o’ sin, though she is some-hoo aye sinnin’ an’ sinnin’ for a’ that.” The missionary takes up the case, and by the help of his own experience so sets forth the truth of the Gospel, that the inquirer enters into light, freedom and joy: and ever afterwards he is to her as an angel of God, and she is to him a “daughter of the King.”

Sometimes he held as many as seventy prayer-meetings in three months. In his reports he complains of scanty fruit in the fewness of conversions. At one time he feels nothing but “formalism “and “leanness of soul “in discussing solemn truths. Again, he goes to the meeting in great fear, and finds the stone rolled away from the mouth of the sepulchre; instead of “darkness, guilt, confusion arising from self-sufficiency,” he enjoys enlargement and blessing. “I have seen impressions made, yet soon after I have seen the last trace of them effaced. I have been helped to set a gracious soul a step up the ladder, yet on going back I have found them ten steps down. What I have longed, and prayed, and sought for has been conversion unto God, and any hope or comfort I have had in seeking this has arisen from this very truth, that He works as seemeth good in his sight, and calleth whom He will.”

Not satisfied with the efforts of his voice, he devised means for the circulation of tracts on the widest scale. Means failing him, for he had spent his last penny in the work, he began to cry to God for aid. One night in prayer, the thought came into his mind, “If I could get a printing-press I could make as many tracts as I could use.” On this he began to pray for a printing-press, and for several months continued to supplicate this gift from his God. The prayer was unexpectedly answered. Accidentally discovering that an old printing-press was for sale, he made inquiries as to the terms, although he did not possess the means of purchase. Much to his astonishment, the person whose property it was let him have it, with a set of old worn types, at a

merely nominal price. Never did warrior bear away the trophies of victory with deeper joy than he felt in carrying the old printing machinery to his father's house. On reaching home, he wrote upon it,

FOR GOD AND ETERNITY;

and then, hastening to his closet, "fell upon his knees, and asked the needed skill to work it." Nothing daunted by his ignorance of printing, he set himself to learn "the divine art," his only instructors the two great teachers of all heroic souls and successful workers, to wit, Failure and Perseverance. Apprentice and master, printer and publisher, missionary and philanthropist, all in one, he ascended by the slow and painful steps of experience struck out of repeated failure, like fire flashing from the smitten eye of him who runneth in the dark, till at length he reached the summit of his fondest wish, and unaided could send forth thousands of tracts like leaves from the tree of life.

His first attempts at printing ended in failure and chagrin. Whole nights were spent in ineffectual efforts; but never despairing, he cried to God for help, and went to work again. Often for hours the work of "composing" goes on, till at length his eye rests with complacency on a page of type, when suddenly the whole falls down into what printers call "pi," and his mortification is complete. Falling again upon his knees, he prays for patience and help. The sight of his own inscription, "For God and Eternity," inspires him with fresh zeal, and although oftentimes "the lumbering press goes all wrong," he perseveres till at length success comes to him, as Jesus came to the disciples upon the sea at the latest watch of the night. "I went on," he says, "till I managed to print two thousand four-page tracts a day. How I did toil, and sweat, and pray at it! Some nights I never slept at all, but went on composing. My constitution was strong, and night after night was spent at the work."

The tracts brought him no money, and his own slender means were speedily exhausted. His benevolent labours excited little sympathy in his native town; the only contribution to his tract enterprise he ever received in Huntly was half-a-crown, brought him by a poor widow. Falling short of paper and money, what was he to do? Give up the unprofitable business, and leave an ungrateful people to themselves? Never. Not in that way are souls won for Christ, and the glory of God advanced. Again he betook himself to prayer, and the same gracious Master who provided the printing-press provided the paper also. Certain Christians in Lincolnshire, whom he had never seen, fell in with one of his tracts, and pleased with its spirit and contents wrote for a supply. He could not supply them for want of paper. This led to further correspondence, and the supply of means to procure paper from time to time.

One tract, entitled “The Lord’s Supper Profaned,” called forth not a little opposition. After printing it, he went round and with his own hand left a copy in every house in his native town. For the professors who have but a name to live it was too searching; hence it gave deadly offence. It was blessed of God, however, in the conversion of several persons, and is still in circulation in the Stirling Series of tracts. Mr. Drummond, who has done so noble a work of the same kind, reissued the faithful tract, and several others also of Mr. Matheson’s. Another tract, entitled “The Origin of the Chinese Bible Fund,” intended to further the circulation of the Scriptures in China, found its way into the Royal Palace, and thus afforded an illustration of Solomon’s saying. “Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men.”

In addition to original matter, our evangelist took extracts from Boston, Edwards, Flavel, and other favourite authors, and went on printing, till at length in an incredibly short space of time he had by his own unaided efforts thrown off and put into circulation a hundred thousand little Gospel messengers, the voice of whose quiet but powerful testimony cannot have been in vain. He was now sowing what many years afterwards he was destined to reap.

That young man, with his immense capacities for earthly promotion and enjoyment, turning his back on all the ambitions and pleasures of the world, and after a long day of sorest toil, spending the silent watches of night in so great a labour of disinterested love, was surely a pleasing sight to the angels of God. Toil, privation, ingratitude, opposition, scorn, disappointment and failure, neither weakened his hands nor discouraged his heart. He endured as seeing Him who is invisible; and bravely did he march forward in his lofty mission of self-sacrificing love to souls, ever affording practical illustration of his own motto, “For God and Eternity.”

Feeling that his work would soon be done in Huntly, he laboured night and day to win souls; and ere he left his native place for other fields, he could say in truth he had warned every sinner and testified the grace of God to every soul. Of all the rare privileges enjoyed by Huntly during a day of merciful visitation extending over the last thirty years, not the least has been the faithful testimony and apostolic labours of her own brave and much-enduring son Duncan Matheson, whose name will be an honour to his native town whilst Christianity lives within her borders, and whose example of untiring energy, heroic perseverance, and Christ-like love of souls will stir the hearts of the ingenuous youth in future generations, and kindle noble aspirations in the bosoms of many yet unborn.

At this time the perishing millions of China lay heavy on his heart, and he longed to go forth and preach the Gospel in the land of Sinim. Much did he “sigh and cry” about the heathen, and often did he say in his inmost

heart, "Lord, here am I; send me." During the last months he spent in Huntly, as he went from house to house pleading with men to receive Christ, the words of Heber's hymn were constantly sounding in his ear:

"Shall we, whose souls are lighted  
With wisdom from on high,  
Shall we to men benighted  
The lamp of life deny?  
Salvation, O salvation,  
The glorious sound proclaim,  
Till earth's remotest nation  
Hath learnt Messiah's name."