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 IX.

*SOME SHEAVES FROM THE HARVEST-FIELD.*

“As streams of water in the south,

Our bondage, Lord, recall:

Who sow in tears, a reaping-time

Of joy enjoy they shall.

“That man who, bearing precious seed,

In going forth doth mourn;

He doubtless, bringing back his sheaves,

Rejoicing shall return.”

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HEY that wisely and steadfastly set their hearts on winning souls are usually favoured with abun­dant success. They delight themselves in God, and in terms of the promise He gives them the desire of their hearts. For many years Duncan Matheson prayed for a wide-spread revival of true religion. The great awakening at length took place, and he was honoured above most men in reaping its fruits. “Give me children, else I die!” was the spirit of all his prayers; and, if facts be of any value, his prayers were abundantly answered.

Several of his spiritual children are already able preachers of the Gospel; some are successful mis­sionaries at home; and some have gone forth to preach among the heathen the unsearchable riches of Christ. A considerable number are useful elders and deacons; others are earnest Sabbath-school teachers and valiant street-preachers; while many more distribute tracts, visit the sick, the outcast, and the perishing. Hundreds are quietly doing that noblest and most difficult kind of Christian work—training up their children in the fear of the Lord. A multitude live to preach the most eloquent of sermons—carrying a cross for Christ; and sing the grandest psalm sung out of heaven—living a holy life. With well-authenticated instances of conver­sion it would not be difficult to fill a volume. Let us take a few from amongst many.

“I find the fruits of his labours in the various dis­tricts which I visit,” is the testimony of a venerable servant of the Lord Jesus Christ on his returning from a recent evangelistic tour. “His footprints will long remain fresh and warm all over the North. I spoke to an interesting young sailor in a railway carriage some time ago. He was an Englishman and a warm-hearted Christian. He told me that, years ago, when his ship lay in the harbour of Macduff, he went to hear a man called Duncan Mathe­son in the Free Church on a week evening, and the Lord apprehended him.”

A thoughtless young man at C\_\_\_\_ went one night to hear him preach, and came away with an arrow in his conscience; but having promised to attend a ball, he went to the gay assembly in the hope of ridding his mind of anxious thoughts amidst the music and the dance. Not thus was his wound to be healed. In the midst of the dance the thought of eternity seized upon him, and he rushed out to seek Christ in the darkness of the night. He did not seek in vain. The light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ dawned upon his soul. He now abandoned the gaieties of the world, and after a brief career of faith and holiness fell asleep in Jesus.

Another young man, a mason by trade, was awakened, and went frequently to hear Matheson. For a while he could find no rest to his soul. The terrors of the Lord followed him to his work; and when the thought of judgment to come arose in his mind, he would begin to hammer the stones with furious energy. His fellow-workmen were aston­ished; and when they asked him what ailed him, he made no reply, so entirely was he absorbed in his endeavours to stifle conviction. “The more I hammered,” said he, “the worse I grew.” Heav­ier and still heavier fell the blows of the Spirit’s hammer, till at length, reduced to self-despair, he dropped into the arms of Jesus and found rest.

On one occasion when he was preaching on the links at Aberdeen, “a gay and godless young man,” as he describes himself, was passing by. An arrow guided by the Spirit pierced the conscience of the youth. He was converted and studied for the min­istry. Last year he was ordained as a missionary to Madagascar. As the evangelist passed away to his rest, the young missionary stood up amidst the solemn services of his ordination at Aberdeen to tell the audience that the voice of Duncan Matheson had been the trumpet of God to his ear, calling him into the fellowship of grace, and the ministry of the Lord Jesus. The standard had just dropped from the hands of the brave standard-bearer as he fell; but bravely was it caught up by his own son in the faith to be planted on the high places of the field, where even now scenes of surpassing glory are wit­nessed in the triumphs of the cross. In the labours of the foreign missionary it is permitted us to hope that the voice of the home evangelist will find a powerful echo among the falling idols of that dis­tant island, and result in gathering a multitude of the heathen to Christ. Thus not in vain did he sow beside all waters. The little winged seeds, not visi­ble to every eye, dropping from the branches amidst the blasts of northern winter are being wafted on the breeze of providential circumstance to the prepared soil of the sunny south. “This also cometh from the Lord of hosts, who is wonderful in counsel, and ex­cellent in working.”

At Perth, when special services were in progress, a young man from Glasgow happened to call at the house of Mrs. S., where Mr. Matheson was staying. When the evangelist was informed that Mr. \_\_\_\_ had been at the door, he said, “Perhaps he has been brought here at this time to be converted and saved. Let us pray for him.” Prayer was offered as follows (I quote this from the journal of Mrs. S.): “O God, if Thou hast brought him to this house, to this town, and to this hall, to save his soul, it will be a wonderful thing. Do it, Lord, do it.” The young man went to the meeting in the hall, was awakened and converted. His own testimony is this: “I was a member of an influential Presbyterian Church, a Sabbath-school teacher, and a tract-distributor, but up to that night I was *a dead soul.* Then I was brought to see I was dead; and then by grace I passed from death unto life through faith in Jesus.”

At Kirriemuir a young woman newly awakened was urging her companion to remain to the second meeting, “Never mind,” said Mr. Matheson, “let her go her own way; she is determined to perish.” This word, accompanied by a look of piercing ten­derness, went to the heart of the thoughtless girl. “Yes, yes,” she said to herself, “I am going my own way, and that way is to death.” The arrow was from the bow of the unerring marksman; and the same invisible hand that shot it drew it out, and healed the wound with the balm of his peace-speaking blood. After two years of a holy life that young believer calmly fell asleep in Jesus.

At Forfar, as was his wont in a strange place, he made the children his friends, and sent them to tell their fathers and mothers to come and hear a stran­ger preaching. “Mither,” said a little boy, “there’s a new man come to the toon to preach; gang and hear him.” Thinking it strange to be asked by her boy, she resolved though with some reluctance to go. How to conceal from her neighbours her going to a revival meeting was her difficulty. Nicodemus went to Jesus under cover of night: this wo­man took her market-basket on her arm as if she was going to make the usual daily purchase, and thus screened herself from the observation and jeers of her neighbours. Day after day she appeared at the meeting with the basket. At length she was brought to the Lord. “Ye’ll no need the basket any more,” said the evangelist to her with a signifi­cant twinkle of his eye. The basket was laid aside: she boldly avowed the Saviour, and became signally useful in bringing others of the same class.

A woman residing in the country, impelled by curiosity, went to Forfar to hear the lay-preacher. Deeply impressed, she resolved on taking the fullest advantage of the meetings, and took lodgings in the town with the view of attending every service. The result was her conversion. She went home, walked with God, testified for Christ, and after a short time fell asleep in Jesus. She knew the day of her merciful visitation. Such is the work of grace.

One day he is standing at a street corner in Perth, and is singing—

“Nothing either great or small,

Nothing, sinner, no:

Jesus did it, did it all,

Long, long ago.”

A young man passing by was arrested by the words of the hymn, which seemed to convey a new truth. He listened a moment. A light he had never seen before dawned upon his heart, and as he stood there on the pavement he became a new creature in Christ Jesus.

“Never shall I forget the first time I had the pleasure of hearing Mr. Matheson,” writes a sta­tion-master on a northern railway. “I was then a stranger to grace and to God. Much against my will I was induced to listen to God’s message through him, and for the first time in all my life I was convinced that I was without God, and with­out hope in the world. His text, ‘Escape for thy life,’ was brought home to my heart with power and demonstration of the Spirit. I was in due time, thank God, brought out of darkness into His mar­vellous light, and from the power of Satan unto God. Oh, then, extol the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.”

Take another—a young man. “I was induced by a friend to go to W\_\_\_\_ Free Church on a Sunday afternoon. The preacher was Duncan Mathe­son. His text was, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” etc. The word came with power to my soul; so much so that, although very reluctant to give way, I could not refrain from shedding tears. This being noticed by Mr. M. he came and spoke, and invited me to the vestry. I afterwards went to the open-air meeting, where my convictions were deepened. For six weeks I continued in great dis­tress; and all the more that many who appeared not so anxious as I was were obtaining liberty from their burdens. In order to be alone I went in the darkness of night to the hill and knelt to pray, but was often disturbed by the sound of footsteps, as I fancied, but no one appeared. At this time I was looking for a mysterious revelation of the Lord Je­sus, with conscious freedom from my burden and for *joy.* Ihad been urged to receive the Lord Jesus into my heart; and in church I kept calling in­wardly faster than tongue could express it, ‘Come in, Lord Jesus! come in! come in!’ thinking that if I continued long enough the Lord would come in; but all in vain. I went home and threw myself on my knees with the intention of praying till I got the blessing. I continued with strong cries and tears until, as I was afterwards told by the rest in the house, the people in the street were standing to listen. When I thought I was about to obtain de­liverance, it was suggested to my mind that by earnest prayer I could get it any time; and, stop­ping, the Spirit was grieved for a time. I felt I was relapsing, and went again to hear Mr. M. in H\_\_\_\_ Free Church, and at the close of the service went with other inquirers into the vestry. Here he ad­dressed us very solemnly, and ended by asking three times, ‘Who is for Christ?’ My heart responded, ‘Me, me.’ The moment of my deliverance was come, and the third time the question was put, I sprang to my feet, and exclaimed, ‘I’m for Christ!’ On second thoughts I was afraid I had committed a great sin; but the words, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved,’ were open and ap­plied to my heart by the Holy Ghost as they had never been; and I was filled with peace. I ran to my office, but could not work, and went on praying and singing alternately. I felt an unspeakable love to my employer, and thought as he sat beside me I could do anything for him.” Years have passed, and this young man has gone on and prospered, being now an elder in a Free Church, and an inde­fatigable worker in the vineyard of the Lord.

“I had convictions and the strivings of the Spir­it,” writes another young man, “from my very in­fancy. Fears of perishing often possessed my little heart, especially at night, and I endeavoured to ob­tain peace by repeating my prayers. As I grew up, I became reckless and even profane. Happen­ing to be from home on a visit to my friends at M\_\_\_\_, I went to hear Mr. Matheson, who was that night in the village. His text was, ‘Strive to en­ter in at the strait gate; for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able.’ Every word he uttered fell with power upon my heart. Conviction of the truth flashed upon me. I felt as if I were the only one in the church, and that every word was directed to me. I was most miserable. I saw I had been rejecting Christ and trifling with God, all the time He had been seeking to lead me to Himself. Mr. Matheson said that people sought to enter in and were not able, because they would not take Christ as their all. I felt I was doing that. He spoke also of the Saviour standing by the side of the broad way, and stretching out his hand to stop the sinner in his hellward course, and the sinner pushing aside that gracious hand and hastening on to destruction. I saw I had been doing so. I never was in such an agony. It was terrible work now with me. The church was surrounded with woods, and oh, how I longed to get out and hide myself in them! I thought I should wrestle with God until I found Christ. I felt as if I could have given life itself to be reconciled to God: I could not bear the thought of being His enemy any longer. It was life or death with me; and I felt that I must either now be saved or plunged into despair. At the close Mr. Matheson took me by the hand and looked me in the face, and I burst into tears. We knelt down and prayed. As I was crying to God, the Lord sent me deliverance. The light flashed in upon my mind. Christ must be my all, and none but Christ: Christ to trust, Christ to love, Christ to obey. It was no mere feeling, but a clear seeing of the truth. I saw that Christ received me, and that I was re­ceived by God in Him. I was enabled to cast my­self entirely upon Him, and receive Him as my all; and rose from my knees saying, ‘Christ for me! none but Christ for me!’ Peace now possessed my heart, the peace that passeth all understanding. I felt as if I could not contain it. Mr. Matheson came forward, and proposed singing the first verses of the fortieth Psalm, ‘I waited for the Lord my God,’ etc. I sang this with all my heart, for I knew I had just been taken up out of the horrible pit and miry clay, and my feet were set upon the Rock. At the door a company of believers joined me, and we were not afraid to awaken the echoes with songs of praise. Next day I spoke to a relative about her soul, and induced her to attend the meeting. This issued in her conversion. Thus the Lord made me instrumental on the first day of my life in Christ in helping to bring a soul to Him. Would that every day since that had been so successful. But amid many vicissitudes of experience, and many short­comings of heart and life, He has kept me till now, and has never permitted me altogether to lose my confidence in Jesus. I have never had a shadow of regret that I chose Christ, and, if I may judge from the past, I never will. And as I witnessed to his name at the first, so I have, though with many shortcomings, done since; and so I trust I will be enabled to do until I am called away to join in the song of the redeemed on high.” This young man is a student and a missionary, whose labours have already been blessed in the conversion of sinners in three several spheres in different parts of Scotland.

The case of another young man, now an ordained missionary to the heathen. “Reports of the work of God’s Spirit in America and Ireland interested several of us, and we began to meet for reading and prayer. I was specially struck with the earnest joy that the work appeared to create in the hearts of those who shared in it; and I remember wishing it should visit ourselves. Mr. Matheson visited our town, and preached on ‘the broad and narrow way.’ Some were impressed; but I felt only the old vague desire. Next time Mr. M. preached, he said, ‘There are some of us here that can lay our heads peace­fully on our pillow tonight, in the assurance that if we should next awake in eternity we should be with Christ. Friend, can you?’ The question was for me, and went like an arrow to my soul. I felt that that was what I could not do; that I was not at peace with God; that to me to awake in eternity would be to awake in hell! The words remained with me. From that time I set myself earnestly to seek the one thing needful; but as to the way of finding it I was as yet quite in error. I thought there was a vast amount of performance lying to my hand before I could be accepted of God. Full pardon seemed to lie beyond great hills and wastes, which must be crossed with toilsome steps if ever I was to attain it. All day in school I used to pray, and when school was over I went home and prayed through the afternoon. I remember one day that my ‘doing’ received a special humiliation. A boy, younger than myself provoked me so much that one of my old sinful expressions rushed out against him. I was sorely pierced; for then my case seemed hopeless, and all my past endeavours were nullified. Mr. M. and others had warned us solemnly against entertaining any *false ground* of comfort; and that I might be preserved from this was always a special petition in my cries for pardon. For several weeks I continued to pray and read, but no light seemed to arise. One afternoon, when Mr. M. was preach­ing, he came upon the expression, ‘Coming to Jesus.’ ‘But,’ said he, ‘some of you are at a loss to know what coming to Jesus means. I will explain it.’ My heart acknowledged its own darkest difficulty; and oh, how eagerly did I listen for the explanation! I thought that now at length I was to learn the way to be saved. But, alas! no. Seeking for something to do, I did not receive the message of the Gospel, that to *look,* to *trust,* was to live. In this state of ignorant legality I continued, though the Gospel of a *present free* forgiveness had been often declared to me, till one afternoon, whose happy date is fixed forever in my memory, I was reading James’s ‘Anxious Inquirer,’ when I came upon these two precious words—‘Come unto Me,’ etc. (Matt. xi. 28), and, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ,’ etc. (Acts xvi. 31). Often had I read them before, but never till now did I *realize* them. The blessed Spirit in that hour testified their truth in my heart, and I could not refrain from exclaiming, ‘And is this *really all* I have to do? is the work really finished? and have I but to receive it and be saved?’ I wondered that I could have read these words so *stupidly* before, they seemed so clear now. Falling on my knees, I thanked God over and over for such a Saviour and so free a salvation. With joyous impatience I ran along to the lodging of a young man who had been one of the first awakened in our company; and when I met him, I told him with an overflowing heart how I saw it all now, and how my heart was filled with peace. That first view of Jesus in His glorious grace can never fade from my recollection. Often since that afternoon has my assurance been clouded; but I have always found, that the only way of peace was to come again, as I did then, in the character of a helpless sinner to an Almighty Saviour. How deeply since that time I have wronged the free love of God only Himself can know; but to the praise of His grace I must de­clare, that there is all the former efficacy in the blood of Jesus to remove the consciousness of guilt. Nor do I look on sin now with the same regard as once. I can sincerely say, that in my most essential character a complete revolution has been effected by the faith of Jesus, and that now the attainment of likeness to the holy Son of God is my reigning desire. How sweet is the believer’s assurance that the sinful heart he now bewails will soon be removed forever. To serve Christ in love, that my soul de­sires above all other things. To win other hearts for Him, or to hear of others winning them, is my joy of joys. May the passion grow! To Him be all the glory. Amen.”

One more instance must suffice; it is that of a young man, now a preacher of the Gospel, and a successful home missionary. “I had heard of the revival work; and being unhappy, I had serious thoughts of becoming religious and good. I went to hear Mr. Matheson. The place of meeting was crowded, and I could find a seat only near the pul­pit. The stranger entered. His manner at once attracted and riveted my attention; it was alto­gether so novel to me. Never till then had I seen a *man* in the pulpit—only a minister. In his whole bearing there was such a striking absence of all stiffness and formality. His prayer touched me: no introduction, no formal conclusion; it was brief, pointed, direct. It was so solemn, yet so tender. Hearing such correspondence with the living God I was deeply solemnized. The text was Matt. vii. 13. He spoke of the work of grace in other places, of sinners convinced, of souls saved. I was moved. But when the hand was pointed towards me in the first pew, when the eye was fixed on me, when the appeal was made to me as to the state of my soul, then the arrow, swift and sharp from the hand of Jehovah, pierced my heart. I trembled. I saw it at once, suddenly, clearly—I was lost, lost, lost. Inquirers were requested to remain. I meant to do so, but a young man, who was unimpressed, pushed me out. Another, a working man, said to me, ‘Are you going in?’ Ye—es,’ I replied, and we went in together. Mr. M. laid his hand tenderly on my shoulder and spoke to me kindly. His ten­derness was too much for me; it touched my mis­erable heart. I felt that God was in righteousness against me, and that I had been in sin against God. The light that gives conviction and condemnation was shining in on me. I was standing out in painful nakedness and solitariness: I was friendless, hopeless. The first kind touch, the first kind word, burst the floodgates of my soul. Giving vent to my surcharged feelings I burst into tears. They were the first I had shed for my soul. We were addressed, and each received a copy Of ‘The Herald of Mercy.’ But I found no rest. Next night he preached on Rev. iii. 20. Others were awakened: many wept: I trembled still the more. Five weeks of agonizing struggle followed. It was a long pain. At one time I resolved not to rise from my knees till I had obtained salvation, but my exhausted body failed me. Again I vowed and vowed that if God would only relieve me, I should serve Him better in the future. It was a long, bitter, agoniz­ing search for peace without reference to atonement in Christ Jesus, during which there was now and then pride of conviction and new-gotten religious­ness. The grace of God through righteousness in Christ began now to dawn, softly and dimly at first. Mr. M. returned to preach; and the word was with power. One evening the peace of God that passeth all understanding filled my soul. I felt it was the sunrise of an eternal day. Floods of light fell on me—light stretching up, far up to the throne of God—light falling down from His face upon my heart. God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.’ There was no fear, no shadow, no bondage. I was intensely happy. I saw the work finished, the rec­onciliation already made, and realized my own in­terest in it. Righteously *in Jesus* Ientered into the presence of God; and graciously I was accepted and blessed. I believed in Jesus, believed in God, saw grace righteously and freely offered, and my heart was full of it. Heaven lay about me. Earth afford­ed no comparison. It was a glorious calm. Old things had passed away. I knew I had entered the kingdom; I was new-born.”

The evangelist was not always a savour of life unto life. Incidents of a solemn and affecting char­acter occurred, two or three of which may be here narrated.

One day a woman began to pour contempt on the word of God, and shut her door in order that she might not be disturbed by the voice of the preacher. He spoke to her, and warned her; but in vain. Some time afterward she took ill, and lay dying. Remorse seized her, and in the agony of her spirit she spoke of Matheson, and cried out, “He told me that God would laugh at my calamity, and mock me when my fear came; and it is all true.” No light came. She was a terror to all who saw her die. She went into eternity in her despair.

A man of violent passions and avowed hatred to godliness opposed the evangelist with much bitter­ness. One day he fell a cursing of Duncan Mathe­son, and died with the oath on his lips.

A young woman heard him preach from the text, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment.” Somewhat impressed at the time, she afterwards re­sisted the Spirit, and returned to vanity. Death came unexpectedly, and knocked at her door. She was unprepared. She remembered the despite she had done to the Spirit of grace, and as she died ut­tered with a melancholy voice the dreadful words, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment.”

Such facts as these are as marginal notes written by the finger of Providence on the borders of revela­tion. We may not be able to interpret them. None but fools will despise them.