

Robert Murray M'Cheyne: The Passionate Preacher

Michael D. McMullen

*Associate Professor of Church History
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary
Kansas City, MO 64118*

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was one of the spiritual giants that God used to bless the nation of Scotland, and ultimately the world. M'Cheyne's name, along with many others that God raised up and used mightily, read like an honor roll of faith and godliness. God's gift of them to Scotland was out of proportion to that country's size. They were raised up and blessed because of grace, and they would have been the first to acknowledge that fact.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was born May 21, 1813, and it was his brother David who was used of God to confirm the divine call on Robert to preach the gospel. David was a very godly witness and example to his younger brother, and he had spoken of the ministry as "the most blessed work on earth." David's premature death had a lasting influence on Robert, and not long after, God saved his soul. David's influence went further because Robert trained for that "most blessed work," and in July of 1835, the Presbytery of Annan licensed Robert M'Cheyne for the ministry. In November of that same year, M'Cheyne was appointed as assistant to John Bonar, who was the minister at Larbert and Dunipace. Exactly one year later, in November 1836, M'Cheyne was ordained to the new Church of St. Peter's in Dundee.

As M'Cheyne arrived in Dundee and surveyed his field of labor, he wrote in his diary, "Perhaps the Lord will make this wilderness of chimney-tops to be green and beautiful as the garden of the Lord, a field which the Lord hath blessed." It should not surprise us when we read these things, to learn that this indeed is what the Lord did abundantly. Why should this be? We get some indication of why God blessed his ministry, from one of the things he wrote very early on in his ministry: "I will not see the face of man," said M'Cheyne, "until I have seen the face of God." M'Cheyne sought God. He sought his face, his cleansing, his glory, and his blessing.

M'Cheyne's health was always delicate, but in 1838 he was so physically drained that his doctors insisted "on a total cessation of his

public work.”¹ Bonar tells us that accordingly, with deep regret, M'Cheyne left Dundee for Edinburgh, for a period of rest and recuperation, hoping says Bonar, that it would only be for a week or two. It was not long into this period that God wonderfully intervened, and M'Cheyne was approached to take part in a preliminary fact-finding mission to Israel. M'Cheyne was very anxious about leaving his flock, but God provided for that too, in another man of God, William Chalmers Burns. As M'Cheyne and his companions toured North Africa, Israel, and Europe, God was moving mightily in spiritual awakening amongst the people of Dundee. God had opened the floodgates of revival and his Holy Spirit was present and active in St. Peter's. Many were brought to faith and repentance and many more were brought to a new relationship with their Lord. M'Cheyne had faithfully sown the seed, William Burns had been called to come and water that seed, and God brought the increase.

Many Christians are familiar to some degree, with Andrew Bonar's classic, the *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne*. It gives the church a glimpse into the life, preaching and passion of a young man utterly dedicated to his Lord. It remains a most challenging work. What I believe to be equally true is that M'Cheyne said and wrote so many wonderful and godly things, that the half has still not been told and God still continues to use the life and writings of his faithful servant. When Dr. Paul Beasley-Murray, the former Principal of Spurgeon's College, heard that I was working on a new collection of M'Cheyne's sermons, he offered the following personal testimony,

The one emphasis that I have taken from M'Cheyne is his stress on the need for pastors to work at their relationship with God. I understand that with Isaiah 49:2 he exalted, “Do not forget the culture of the inner man. I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his sabre clean and sharp: every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.” I find these words personally challenging and believe that they need to be daily borne in mind by every minister of God.

M'Cheyne would die at the relatively young age of 29. But in those few short years, he lived closer to God than most believers do, if given several lifetimes. M'Cheyne wrote, “Live so as to be missed.” What an eternal challenge this remains. In God, all his children should so seek to live that they make a difference: a difference in the lives of others; a difference in heaven because they have been used of God in their lives and witnessing, to be the instrument for the salvation of the lost; and a

¹ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of the Rev. Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (1869), 92.

difference in God's church, because they have been faithful to whatever God calls them to be and to do. If we all were to live like this, as M'Cheyne sought to do, how we too would be missed. It is not surprising that one of M'Cheyne's favorite texts was, "The night cometh when no one can work."

This sermon is taken directly from the original handwritten sermon manuscripts of Robert Murray M'Cheyne and has never before been published. It has not been altered or amended in any way, save for the very occasional insertion of a word for the sense of the passage, or to clarify slightly language that has become obscure. It was a labor of love to transcribe the writings of M'Cheyne and the present writer considered it a gift of God, that he discovered a vast treasure-trove of original and unpublished manuscripts housed in the Special Collection section of the Library of New College, Edinburgh. This discovery means that no longer does the Christian church have to be dependent on the reprinting of the same sermons, wonderful as they are, for with the continuing appearance of these newly-transcribed sermons there are many additional ones that we can appreciate and learn to treasure. At the time of writing, one volume has already appeared of previously unpublished sermons entitled, *The Passionate Preacher* (Christian Focus). Two further volumes have also been completed; at least one will be printed by Banner of Truth.

The following sermon is presented here, as a testimony to that which God can do with a surrendered life. It is not here to praise M'Cheyne's skill at sermon construction, nor is it here as a piece of 19th century history. It is here as an example of what God did in and through one committed life and to remind us that what God has wonderfully done before, he can do again and even more so.

I Am In A Strait Betwixt Two

Philippians 1:23

"I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is (by much) far better."

It is a happy thing to live, to breathe the fresh air of heaven, to move from place to place, to see, to hear, to speak, in a word to live is happiness. But the Bible says, that to be in Christ is better than life. 'In Thy favour is life; and Thy lovingkindness is better than life.' To be converted by the Spirit of God, to be convinced of sin, and then to be convinced of righteousness, to be led to a hearty and saving acceptance of Christ as my only and all-sufficient Saviour, that 'is better than life.' And, indeed, I am quite sure that those of you who have been thus converted by God are feeling at this moment that this 'life of the soul' is better and pleasanter than even natural life, that the light of God's

countenance is sweeter far than the light of the sun, that the saving health of His countenance gives more joy than does the joyous current of health and life that bounds through the youthful veins. Ah! yes, brethren, you never knew what life was till you could say, 'Christ liveth in me.' But the words before me point us to greater things than these. 'For,' says Paul, 'I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.' To live is good and happy. To be in Christ is better than life. But to be with Christ is far better than all.

The words of my text in the original are much more full and expressive than they are in our English translation. Indeed, they are so very full of meaning that it is impossible to translate them perfectly. The word here rendered 'I am in a strait' is the same as Christ uses when He says, 'I have a baptism to be baptised with, and now am I straitened till it be accomplished.' It implies great anxiety of mind, not a sudden overwhelming anxiety but an abiding anxiety, ever pressing on the mind. The word rendered 'desire,' is the same which Christ uses where He says, 'with desire have I desired to eat this Passover with you,' and indicates an intense desire of the mind. The word rendered 'to depart,' signifies to be unloosed like a vessel set loose from its moorage. The words rendered 'far better,' if translated literally, would be, 'by much more better.' The departure to be with Christ appeared so excellent to Paul, that he heaps up words more than our language can hold, in order to express it. 'I am continually in a strait betwixt two, having an earnest desire to depart, to be unmoored from the shores of this world and to be with Christ, which is much better, aye, far better.'

The doctrine taught by the passage is, that 'To be WITH Christ is far better than to be IN Christ.' To be with Christ is far better than to be in Christ, because then we shall never have any doubts of our salvation. When God brings a man out of 'the horrible pit and miry clay,' and 'sets his feet upon a rock,' that man is safe for eternity. When a sinner, under a sense of the dreadfulfulness of his natural condition, closes with Christ as the Saviour of lost sinners, he becomes a member of Christ's body, and is, therefore, as sure to be saved as if he were already sitting on the throne with Christ. And not only is the sinner safe in the moment of believing, but he has a sweet sense of safety. He is not only 'founded on a rock,' but he feels that his feet are on a rock. He is not only a member, but he feels his union, and has a sense of acceptance in the Beloved. And this sense of safety is what is called the rest or peace of believing.

It is a calm and tranquil feeling poured over the anxious breast, a sense that God's anger is all turned away; a feeling that all past sins are cast behind God's back; yea buried in 'the depths of the sea.' Now, though the safety of a believer never changes, yet his sense of safety very much changes. When he is once founded on Christ, the only foundation

stone, he never can be shaken off; but still he may often lose all sense of being safe. When once a member of Christ's body, he can never be torn off again, yet he may, for a time, and through his own sin, lose all feeling of being a member. He may become so cold and lukewarm that he may altogether doubt whether he is or ever was a saved person. As long as we are in this world, there are many things to cloud and obscure the peace of believing.

The believer falls into some open sin, and by so doing, brings guilt upon his conscience. Again, he begins to hear the condemning voice of the law. A cloud seems to intercept his view of the Saviour. He falls into sin, and should fall from all sense of safety; for it would be a calamity to feel safe while he is in backsliding condition.

He is betrayed into worldly company; and from the beginning to the end of the feast, he hears nothing but worldly conversation. All around him are taking thought what they shall eat, and what they shall drink. The name of the Saviour is not once mentioned. To introduce it would be like bringing in a poisonous serpent, from which every one would shrink back with horror. The believer sits silent and is half ashamed of Christ. He is ashamed to show that he is a Christian. And when he comes home at night, what wonder if prayer and the Word be all distasteful to him, and he has lost all sense of safety.

The believer wearies in well-doing, and thus also he loses his sense of safety. Once he 'put his hand to the plough' in 'every good work.' But now he draws back his hand. He grows weary of feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked, and visiting them that are sick and in prison. The work has turned burdensome to him, and he has wearied of it. The poor have been ungrateful, his time is too much occupied; or, on some pretence or other, Christ's service is neglected, and darkness and insecurity are the consequence. He begins to doubt his safety, and well he may.

The approach of death often clouds the view of Christ. The pains of dissolving nature are often very dreadful; the mind is often altogether taken up with looking at them; and so the eye is lifted away from Christ; and thus the dark valley becomes very dark. Clouds and darkness rest upon it. The believer, who rejoiced all his life long, has often a long night of darkness on his death-bed, much doubt and much perplexity, and though the everlasting arms are underneath him, yet he has no full sense of his safety.

But to depart and be with Christ, is to be freed from all these doubts and obscurations of the Sun of Righteousness, and therefore, it is far better. When the soul of the believer has left its mortal body, it finds itself in the arms of the holy angels. These angels rejoiced when he was 'born again' into the world of grace, and how they rejoice far more when

he is born a third time, into the world of glory: for at death the souls of believers do immediately pass into glory. No sooner do they leave the body than they are with Christ, and there they are not only safe, for they were quite safe before, they are no safer than they were, but their sense of safety is now complete and everlasting. It shall never be clouded any more. Not another doubt shall ever darken their joy, not another fear disturb their 'perfect peace.'

No more shall that soul fall into sin to take away his sense of pardon and acceptance. No more shall he mix with worldly company, for nothing can enter in there that defileth. The name of the Saviour shall gladden every feast of love and joy. The praise of the Saviour shall be the only melody; no more shall worldly friends and worldly talk darken his sense of acceptance. No more shall he weary in well-doing, for they that are before the throne serve God day and night in His temple. No more shall sloth creep over the soul, no more shall vain excuses keep back the hands from deeds of love. No more shall unchristian coldness take away the sense of safety. No more shall God take away the light of His countenance. He shall be 'with Christ,' admitted to closest intercourse; always in sight of the Lamb that was slain; 'for the Lamb that is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and lead them to living fountains of water.'

Often they wept on earth because Christ had withdrawn from them, but now God shall wipe all tears from their eyes. He is with Christ. He shall not die any more; no more shall the pangs of a dissolving body take up his thoughts; no more shall clouds arise from the dark grave to obscure the face of the Saviour. He is with Christ, and his sense of safety is complete. He sees the hell from which he is delivered. He feels the heaven into which he is brought, and he is filled with an unvarying sense of safety. Like some spent swimmer to whom a rope is cast, he is safe as soon as he has tied the rope around him; and he may have a lively sense of safety even amid the waves; but it is only when he is safely brought ashore, and sits down upon the rock, and looks upon the deep gulf from which he has been saved, and feels the rock beneath him; it is only then that his sense of safety is complete.

Just so, brethren, when some poor sinner, spent with vain struggles to save himself, at length consents to be saved by Christ, he is safe, quite safe for eternity; and he may have a real sense of safety, even amid the billows of this world's trials and sorrows; but it is only when he is brought ashore, when he is brought to be 'with Christ'; when he looks upon the gulf of hell from which he has been saved, and feels himself casting his crown at the Redeemer's feet; it is only then that his sense of safety is complete for eternity. It shall never be shaken and never be darkened any more.

Oh, believer, the joys of faith are sweet beyond expression! 'Though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable, and full of glory.' But oh, what shall the joys of sight be, when we are 'with Christ,' and when we shall see Him as he is; and when we feel that the ocean is passed, when we feel that the shore is won; when we 'see the King in His beauty, and we are put in possession of the land that is very far off!' Oh, it is 'far better' to be 'with Christ!' Why then, cling to the world as if it were your all? Why tie yourselves to riches, and houses, and friends? Flee these things, O man of God! In the brightest sunshine of this world, when friends are dearest, and all things go smoothest, still if you are taught of God you will say, to be with Christ is far better. And the more doubts you have, O feeble believer, so much the more let the thoughts of departing be sweet and pleasant unto you, for there are no doubts yonder.

To depart and be with Christ is far better. It is far better to be with Christ, for then we shall be like Him in holiness. When a sinner flees to Christ he is 'born again' by the Holy Ghost: a new life is begun in his soul which shall never come to an end. A spark has been lighted that shall never be quenched. The 'leaven' is thrust in, and the whole shall yet be 'leavened.' The seed is sown, and there shall yet be a harvest. The Spirit has come to his soul, and will never wholly leave it. 'He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.' But as long as the believer is in this world, there are many things to retard the progress of this life of holiness.

There is a body of sin and death. The believer is quite different from the world. He hates all sin; strives against all sin; prays against all sin; and yet he has a body of sin and death. Sin does not reign in him as a king, and yet it dwells in him as a hated guest. Now, this of all things most keeps back the life of holiness. The world is full of temptation suited to his natural heart. He cannot go into any company but he will meet with some thing drawing him to sin. The believer has often wicked acquaintances, who side with the evil part of his nature, and above all things try to draw him into worldly compliances. Besides, his old habits return upon him again and again. Before he was a believer he followed in some path of sensuality, or covetousness, or passionateness, and now he will at times experience almost irresistible impulses to go back to his old courses. Above all, Satan, the accuser of the brethren, tries to beguile him from the simplicity that is in Christ. He knows that there is but one way in which a believer can walk holily, that is, by abiding in Christ, so that Christ may abide in him, and he may bear much fruit; and, therefore, against this Satan directs all his energies. In this way, most of all, does Satan try to keep down the life of holiness. But when we 'depart,' and are 'with Christ,' all these hindrances shall drop off; and, therefore, it is

far better 'to depart.'

The believer at death is 'made perfect in holiness.' Nothing that defileth can enter into paradise; nothing that maketh or loveth a lie. The body of sin and death has been laid in the gloomy grave. No more does he cry out, 'Oh, wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?' The world with its busy hum, with its fascinating companies, and pleasures of sin, that world is left behind. The dead ear cannot hear its siren melody. The glazed eye cannot behold its vain show; and the spirit is safe 'with Christ.' The wicked companions, too, are all left behind. Their jests and their raillery are heard no more.

No more does the hand of friendship tempt to sin. There are no wicked companions with Christ. The old habits are now put off for ever. No fear now of returning to old courses of sin! The heart is now made perfect in holiness. He is led by the Lamb to living fountains of water. And, last of all, Satan his great enemy cannot reach him now. He is the prince of the power of the air. But to be with Christ is to be above the air, it is to be 'in Paradise.' Satan cannot enter into this Paradise. 'There shall in no wise enter in anything that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination.'

And not only shall the soul be freed from all that would draw it to sin, but every thing there shall incite it to holiness. In this world, almost everything we see, or hear, or handle, may lead the soul to sin. In that world everything shall lead the soul to holiness. We shall see Christ. We shall see God. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.' 'We shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.' And how can we see His loveliness without loving Him? How can we love Him without serving Him? And if we love Him, we will keep His commandments.

Oh, professed believer in Christ, do you love holiness? You are no believer if you do not. Do you long after it, and pray for it? Do you groan under sin, and are you wearied to be rid of it? 'To be with Christ' is to be rid of it for evermore! Oh then, how plainly does it appear to you that it is better to depart and 'to be with Christ!'

Why, then, will any of you cling to this world, as if it were your all? Why will you labour to be rich, and pierce yourselves through 'with many sorrows?' And why are you so afraid of death? Why do you shudder at the very name of death? It is a dark avenue; but it opens into the world of holiness and never-ending life. 'To depart and be with Christ is far better.'

It is better to be with Christ, for there will be no more tribulation. When a sinner flees to Christ, he is pardoned, justified, has peace, and rejoices in God his Saviour, and he is enabled to 'glory in tribulations also.' The God of Providence becomes his Father, and, therefore, he will not fear what man can do unto him. He has the ordinary troubles of other

men; pains, and losses, and bereavements; but he feels that a Father's hand administers every cup of suffering, that a Father's hand gathers all his tears into 'His bottle.' He has troubles which other men have not; persecutions and hatred from the world, and yet he has joy here, too, for he knows that God is able to shut the lions' mouths, and to shelter him from the 'world's dread laugh.' But still this world is to the believer a world of sorrow. This is a fact which cannot be concealed. The Bridegroom is not here. But 'to be with Christ' is to be free from all tribulation, and, therefore, it is far better.

When Christ ascended to His Father and our Father, He bade farewell to sin and sorrow for evermore. No more will He bear the pangs of infancy in His hard cradle in the manger! No more will He bear the pains of hunger in the wilderness! No more sit down wearied by the well of Sychar! No more will He sleep for weariness in the fisher's boat, rocked by the dashing waves! No more will He bear the pains of false friends! No more will He bear the kiss of the betrayer! No more will He feel the pains of His pierced hands and feet! No more will He feel the shame of the cross! No more will His tongue cleave to his jaws for thirst! No more will He say, My heart is melted like wax in the midst of my bowels! No more bow the head in dying agony! All His pains are past, and all His wounds are healed! The scar in His side is now whole: his body is now 'a glorious body.'

His raiment is white as the light, and His face is as the sun shineth in his strength! Oh, brethren, if ye be members of Christ's body, ye, too, shall be free from tribulation, sin, and suffering when you die. You shall bid farewell to sin and sorrow for evermore. Now you may be often hungry and often thirsty, often faint and weary toiling in the sun. But then you shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more, neither shall the sun light on you nor any heat. In this world you may have 'much tribulation,' but at death you shall come out of 'great tribulation,' and serve Him day and night in His Temple. Here the world may scorn you, and point the finger, and put out the lip; but with Christ you shall be free from all; you shall be out of hearing 'of the world's dread laugh.' Oh, is it not far better to depart and be 'with Christ?'

It is better to be with Christ, for then we shall praise God and Christ more heartily. When a sinner is first brought to cleave to Christ, then, for the first time, does he praise God heartily. Unconverted men may join in singing 'psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs,' but they never praise God from the heart. But often the first opening of the mouth of a poor sinner brought to Christ is in praises. 'Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name.' Nothing gives more joy to a true believer than to praise God. The singing of psalms of praise has always abounded most in the best times of the church; and hence it may clearly

be seen how small the company of believers is in our day, when the singing of psalms in families is so little known, and so few join heartily in the praises of the sanctuary. But the believer cannot always praise in this world. He is often afflicted, and, being afflicted, he prays; or, even if he be merry and sing psalms, yet, oh how cold are his praises compared with the praises which he might be expected to give! How little proportioned to the glory of Him we praise! Oh, how seldom does the believing heart glow with a flame of praise! But when we are 'with Christ,' we shall always praise, and praise him in the highest degree; therefore it is far better to be with Christ. We shall always praise; because we shall always have a vivid sense of what we are saved from. On earth we have low and poor conceptions of the wrath of God, and these only at times; therefore we are little thankful for being brought to Christ. But in heaven we shall see the wrath of God poured out upon the Christless; we shall see their pale dismal faces, we shall hear their sad cries and the gnashing of their teeth; we shall see the smoke of their torment ascending up before God for ever. Oh, how shall we praise God for His electing love that chose us to salvation. How all believers shall praise Christ for His redeeming love, for enduring such pains in our stead! There shall be no end to our praise, and it shall be rendered with all our heart.

We shall always have a sense of what we are saved to. On earth we have low and poor conceptions of the blessedness of God's favour, and friendship, and love, therefore we are little thankful. But then we shall feel more fully the warmth of His love we shall drink the rivers of his pleasures, our joy shall be full; we shall be like vessels filled to overflowing: 'In His presence there is fullness of joy; at His right hand are pleasures for evermore.' We shall feel all this, and feel that we have been redeemed that we may enjoy all this. Oh, how we shall praise Christ then for his obedience in our stead, and God the Father for His love in sending His Son to be our Substitute and Surety!

We shall have a constant sight of the beauty and glory of God and of Christ. On earth we have very poor conceptions of the infinite loveliness of God. It is only now and then that a believer enters so fully through the rent veil as to see the beauty of God, and to inquire in His Temple; but then we shall be like pillars in the Temple of our God, and go no more out. It is only in the works of creation and providence, sometimes in the ordinances, in the Word, or broken bread, that we can see God. It is, at the best, but 'as in a glass darkly; but then face to face. We shall know even as we are known.' No more 'in a glass'; but in reality we shall see God, and eternally gaze on His uncreated loveliness. Oh, what praises shall this draw from our burning hearts to all eternity! 'This God is our God for ever and ever.' Oh, then, brethren, is it not better to be 'with

Christ,' that we may love and praise God more?

Even on earth much of the believer's happiness consists in praise. The happiest Christians are always most engaged in praise. The more heavenly-minded you grow, the more you will abound in praise. The work of heaven is often described as praise. Every description of heaven given in the Book of Revelation contains much of praises in it. The true happiness of a creature consists in giving praise to the God who made him. Oh, then, how much better to depart and be 'with Christ!' It is far, far better!

This should reconcile us to the death of believing friends. They are now with Christ, and that is far better. And shall we grudge them their happiness? When friends are removed to a distance in this world; when they go to the golden shores of India; when they make money, or settle well in the world, we do not grudge them their happiness. And why would you grudge believing friends to be with Christ, which is far better than thousands of gold and of silver?

This should reconcile us to die. If we are, indeed, believers, to die is to be with Christ, which is far better. Do you doubt if it be better to be with Christ than to be here? Then you are no believer. You say, I am a feeble believer. Then it is most of all good and blessed for you to be 'with Christ.' The feeblest swimmer is the one that should long most for the shore. The ship that is tempest-tossed and most shattered should long most for the harbour; so you, if you are a feeble believer, should see it more than others desirable to be with Christ. If you have many doubts and fears, if you have much opposition to your holiness, if you cannot bear the world's scorn and raillery, if you have but seldom a full heart of praise, then you should, most of all, long 'to be with Christ': for to you, more than to others, it is 'far better' than to be here.

How sad to be Christless! This whole day I have been speaking to the children of God, the little flock. Oh, do not think that I have been speaking to you, poor Christless souls! It is not better for you to depart. Oh, it would be far worse for you. This world is your only heaven. Beyond it everywhere to you is hell. May God write this truth upon your hearts—If you be not 'in Christ' in time, you will never be 'with Christ' in Eternity.