

BIOGRAPHY OF MR. JAMES WATSON.

“The man who hangs on every smiling hour,
A coward proves to questionings of thought;
While he, who dares with an undreading eye
To fathom his own nature, in the grave
Descend, eternity’s deep gates unbar,—
Unblasted can the face of God behold,
And grow familiar with an angel’s smile!”

THE subject of the following lines was born on December 25th, 1813, at Breckon-hill, betwixt Glazedale and Fryup, in the parish of Danby, in the county of York, an isolated and romantic place in the Whitby circuit. He was the second son, and third child of John and Ann Watson, who survive to feel their loss.

The years of his infancy and early boyhood were spent under his father’s roof, and inspected by his father’s eye; and while thus connected with the family circle he went to the school supplied in the neighbourhood, but manifested great indifference about learning.

His father not being in circumstances to warrant his keeping his children at home, at the early age of twelve years, James left the family hearth and went into a farmer’s servitude. From documents he has left behind, it appears that, at this early period,—as the result of the Spirit’s operations, and his father’s counsels and admonitions,—his mind was under considerable religious impressions; but although the first years of his separation from his father’s house were spent in professedly religious families, (one of which he speaks of in very respectful terms,) yet those impressions gradually wore away, and he became wicked to a degrading and awful extent: so much so, that, at the age of sixteen, to use his own language, he had “learned immorality with such astonishing facility, that he might be ranked amongst the foremost of Lucifer’s army.”

About this period, he speaks of attending a camp-meeting held by the Primitive Methodists at Lealholm-side, near Fryup; when such was the character of the preaching and the influence of the praying services, that he was again awakened to discover his position, and to feel emotions which cannot be better described than in his own language: “My guilty conscience was aroused, and dictated clearly and awfully my true state; my sins stared me in the face, and I imagined myself all but damned.” He attended a love-feast held in the evening, and was powerfully moved by the Spirit’s influence; struggling with fear lest any of his companions should see him, he eventually gave way to the tempter; the Spirit was grieved, and, in the midst of his temptations, struggles, and convictions, the meeting was closed, through the persecution of some ungodly young men, and he again associated with his wicked companions.

There was a slight reformation in his conduct for awhile; but he was fast going back to his former excess, when the Lord by a providential incident gave him another loud call. He was precipitated from a loaded cart, falling with his head upon the ground; those who witnessed the accident went to his assistance, expecting to find him killed; but, after a short time, to their astonishment, he was able to arise, and with a little assistance; to walk to his master’s house. A deep impression was thereby made upon his mind; but, instead of cherishing and cultivating it, he suffered it to wear away as he recovered strength.

Having thus repeatedly slighted the calls of God’s Spirit and providence, and disregarded those convictions which had been produced in his heart, he was becoming, as he advanced to manhood, more and more fit for the service of Satan; he now let loose all his passions, and again ran to an awful extent in rioting and wickedness. “Night and day,” he says, “I was taking counsel against the Lord, and fighting against the Most High God.” The whole of his proceedings at this period were a mass of iniquity, his companions a giddy multitude, and his affections inordinate in the extreme. While he was taking these rapid strides towards the fiery abyss, the Holy Spirit still followed him, and caused him frequently to resolve to alter his course, and give God his heart; but companions, temptations, and lusts combined to drag him farther into the snare of the enemy, and lead him onward to do evil and despise the goodness of God.

At this time his father took a farm in Farndale, several miles from his previous' residence, and it was arranged that his son James should go with him to reside thereon. By this step he was taken a considerable distance from his companions in vice (a merciful providence to our departed friend;) he was now upon new ground, surrounded by fresh scenery, among strangers, and where the power of temptation was greatly weakened: he began to reflect, the Spirit strove powerfully with him, and the remembrance of the past deeply wounded him. Of his feelings, he gives the following description: "When I was alone, my sins stared me in the face, devils haunted my abode, and I imagined the cries of hell reverberated in my ears; and, for a season, I looked upon my crimes as unpardonable, and was almost driven to despair. At this time I went to hear a sermon preached on the unpardonable sin, as it is called; but I went with a trembling heart, lest I should be the character described by the preacher. From the discourse I did not receive much satisfaction, labouring still under a considerable degree of fear that I had provoked the Lord till he had cast me off for ever. The disquietude of my mind produced a degree of insanity at intervals, and rendered me of all men the most miserable."

After carrying his burden for some weeks, Providence led him to go to see some relations living at a distance; and while there, a sermon was preached and a prayer-meeting held in the house of an uncle of his; and he was enabled, in the exercise of strong prayer, and by a simple act of faith, to cast his guilty, burdened sinful soul upon the promise made by God to save a ruined world through the great Atonement: and He who is ready to pardon, broke his fetters asunder, removed his load, pronounced him free, and gave him the Spirit of adoption; the Spirit of God bearing witness with his, (and carrying rational, as well as scriptural evidence to his understanding,) that he was accepted by the Father through Jesus Christ.

To those who had the privilege of personally knowing Mr. Watson in after-life, it will not appear incredible, that immediately after being converted himself, he began to exhort those around him to repent, and believe on the Lord Jesus, that they also might experience a similar change. On his return home the following day, he met a neighbour on the moor over which he had to pass; to whom he immediately began to preach the way of salvation, telling him of the great things that God had done for his soul.

There was then no preaching by the Primitive Methodists within three miles of his father's house; but they were immediately sent for, a class was formed, he was made the leader of it, and, in his hands, it prospered considerably. Prayer-meetings were also established, and he frequently delivered exhortations, and preached to the assembled multitudes; an extensive revival broke out in several of the adjacent places, and it is in evidence that, to a great extent, the success which followed, was attributable instrumentally to his earnest appeals and fervent zeal; indeed, he was a "living flame," communicating living influence, and attracting the attention of surrounding observers. Let it not be imagined that this is the language of extravagance or designed eulogism, emanating from the pen of an admirer and friend, but a statement of facts the truth of which can be supported by living testimony; of facts involving a principle in strict accordance with the philosophy of Scripture and reason, and that is ocularly demonstrated in all countries and among all people where the right means are used. "Would God that such facts were of more frequent occurrence |"

In a few months his name appeared on the local preachers' plan of the Whitby circuit; and he laboured with acceptance and success, rendering occasional assistance also to the Pickering branch of the Malton circuit. But he was destined to move in a higher sphere and more extensive field of usefulness than he could possibly occupy in a local capacity; accordingly, in July, 1833, he accepted a call from the North Shields circuit, to become a travelling preacher.

If there should appear to those who are of cautious character anything like precipitance in the rapid advancement of Mr. Watson from conversion to public life, (he having been converted, made a leader, local preacher, and called to sustain the office of a travelling preacher in twelve months,) the reason given by his biographer-in defence of it is, that "he was an extraordinary man."

During his stay in the North Shields circuit, a period of eighteen months, he laboured much without seeing that amount of fruit which he desired. In his journal, regularly kept, he gives an account of his ministerial habits and desires, with the great pleasure he felt when sinners were converted, and the disappointment he experienced when success did not reward his toil.

Extensive family visiting, prudent application to study, frequent retirement to his closet for private devotion, solemn and earnest appeals from the pulpit, with a constant readiness to support prayer-meetings, class-meetings, and fellowship-meetings, were the means he used, in simple dependance on the Lord, to bring about a revival; to which may be added a strong personal desire to realize the object sought; and although his success was not equal to his desire, still he often speaks of conversions and the pleasure he felt when the kingdom of Christ was extending.

The next field of labour which he occupied was the Sunderland circuit. Here his efforts were accompanied by signal manifestations of Divine influence; he often speaks of copious outpourings of the Spirit, and the conversion of four, six, eight, or ten souls in one service. He seems to have been in his element when making those aggressive movements on the kingdom of Satan, and thus adding new trophies to his Master's cause. Mr. R. Atkinson, who was then his superintendent, and has succeeded him on the field of toil where he has laid down his armour, speaks of him in terms of high commendation, especially as being well skilled in the art of pointing sinners to the cross, and leading mourners into the possession of a present salvation; a trait this which ranks high in the character of ministerial usefulness, and is immediately connected with the genius of the gospel, as developed in the pages of revelation!

After having spent one year and a half in the Sunderland circuit, he was removed to Alston-moor, in Cumberland; but here he did not appear to have the same success which crowned his efforts on his former stations. This might arise, in part, from certain local circumstances over which he could have little or no control, and the existence of which he frequently deplored in his journal; but it is thought, by many of his friends, that at this period of his history, his thirst for knowledge so far strengthened as to produce habits of too recluse a character; and, hence, in satiating his desire for expansion of mind and an increase of intellectual attainments, there followed a reduction in the efforts much needed at all times to originate and carry on a revival of religion. From his journal we learn that there occurred a paucity of family visiting, and a lowering of the tone of earnest breathing for the salvation of sinners— which can only flow from a heart eaten up with zeal for the house of the Lord. True, we find him preaching to overflowing congregations, while listening hundreds sit entranced before him, as though bound by magic-spell, and now and then record is made of a sinner's conversion, or the reclaiming of a backslider; but the holy impetus—shaking the sinner from his strongholds, slaying the man of sin, bringing the captives to crowd around the penitent's form to supplicate, in penitential earnestness, the throne of mercy on behalf of their guilty souls, until by faith they realize the salvation of the gospel—does not appear so prominent as it formerly did. Not that we wish to be understood as derogating in the least the value of enlarged mental attainments; no, we listen with great pleasure at all times to the gospel—however lively the imagery, however lofty the strains of eloquence, however deep and argumentative the reasonings of the preacher—provided there is an accompanying influence, which carries conviction to the understanding, arouses the conscience, and, as with an invisible hand, arrests the sinner in his course of madness, and brings him as a captive to the Saviour's feet. Nor do we know of any other topic than the gospel that presents itself with equal claims to the best powers of the human mind, or that gives equal scope thereto, however vast its natural or acquired grasp; but we cannot yield, for one moment, that human acquirements are of any real service, farther than as they subserve in effectually publishing the message of mercy. That preaching which is instrumental in raising man from the ruins of his fall, and bringing him to that honoured position in which the gospel proposes placing him—whatever other accomplishments it has—must be “with demonstration of the Spirit, and with power,”

From Alston-moor, Mr. Watson removed to Newcastle-on-Tyne. Of his labours here, his biographer knows but little; his journal, while stationed in the circuit, not being found. According to report, he ranked high as a preacher, maintained the congregations well for two years, kept up the interests of the chapels, and left the circuit in a pretty healthy state; and on his removal, he left behind him many friends and admirers.

We next find him unfurling the glorious banners of the cross at Westgate, among the mountaineers of Weardale, pointing sinners to the “Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.” He remained only twelve months in the circuit, and was taken away much against the wish of the people: his journal while there is not to be found. Afterwards, the Darlington circuit became his field of rambles in search of perishing immortals. Here he filled the office of superintendent; and although there is no journal from which a clear and definite account of his labours can be

gathered, yet from other evidence we learn, that, in the midst of considerable difficulty, the blessing of the Lord attended his efforts, and the circuit reported a respectable increase of members at the close of the first year. During his second year's station in the circuit, he was called, in winter, to attend a public service held in a temporary booth at Middlesbro', in the Stockton circuit; our brother addressed the audience at considerable length, became very much animated, and perspired freely; but instead of prudently retiring as soon as he had done, he remained till the close of the meeting, and caught a cold. After returning home he became very ill, and a medical man was called in, who professed that he would "soon put him right;" but after having attended him three weeks, Mr. Watson, believing himself to be on the verge of the grave, called in another medical adviser, who corroborated his view, telling him that, from improper treatment, he had been brought so low that it was doubtful whether he could ever be brought out again, and that it was next to certain that his constitution had received a shock from which it could never perfectly recover. However, by the blessing of God on the means used, he recovered partially, but was never able to attend to his ministerial duties more than three months together.

Out of respect for Mr. Watson, and with a desire that his health might be re-established, he was next stationed in the Pateley-bridge circuit; where it was thought he would have some air and scenery, resembling those of his native locality, Netherdale—a beautiful valley, adorned with rich and romantic prospects, and the atmosphere of which is salubrious and invigorating. He was kindly received, and laboured (so far as his bodily strength would admit) with acceptance, and not without success; but the fatal blow had been struck at his constitution, his infirmities began to multiply, his pain increased, and his physical position became more and more embarrassing and critical. The most renowned of the faculty in the neighbourhood were applied to, but his case baffled all their experiments. A large tumour appeared on the lower point of the blade of his right shoulder, close to the spinal part of his back; and the incessant sufferings which he endured therefrom are indescribable: they frequently caused convulsions which alarmed his attendants, and made his children weep, while they tremblingly stood to witness their father's agony.

An anxious concern was felt by his friends respecting the issue of these threatening appearances. To relieve him and sustain the circuit an assistant was engaged to fill his place; for during his stay in the circuit, which was two years, he could labour but little. From his journal, it appears that he often had hard struggling to keep his mind from sinking; his physical debilities had, to a considerable extent, weakened his nervous system, he saw that the circuit was not making that advancement which he earnestly desired it should, and the unpromising future frequently passed before his vision in dull perspective. No wonder that, under such a combination and pressure, he was often found upon his knees spreading his case before the Lord, beseeching him to undertake his cause, and come to his help; and it is consoling to his survivors in the Christian strife, to know that the Source to which he applied never failed him.

On May 27th, 1846, his journal says, "A night of great pain! I am afraid I give way to fretfulness. O, for more resignation and fortitude of mind to bless the rod, and profit by it!"

"28th. How infinitely lovely Jehovah is, and how glorious the provision which he has made for his people. To be with him, to see him as he is, and to be like him! What has earth to offer like these?"

"June 10th. I am still getting worse; I have been in great pain all the day, so that I could not find a resting place. Lord, thou knowest me; thou hast promised strength to enable me to bear my afflictions, and I cast my burthen upon thee."

"12th. The mind is graciously sustained; I have many blessings and helps, which call for gratitude—the sympathy of friends and their prayers, the word of God, good books, and all the attendance which affection can prompt."

Quotations from his journal might be made to a great extent, but the foregoing will suffice to show that while his afflictions were heavy, he cultivated a familiarity with the throne of grace, and therefrom derived strength proportioned to his day; by which his soul was filled with gratitude to God and to those who administered to him the smallest comfort and assistance.

In July, 1845, he removed from Pateley-bridge to Thirsk branch, in the Ripon circuit. He entered this station unfit to labour; consequently a substitute was provided for him. The respect that was felt for him by the authorities of the circuit, (including his brethren, the travelling preachers,) caused them to receive him with the utmost cordiality and respect, although they believed he would probably never be able to attend to the public duties of a preacher. However, they had determined, if possible, to render kind attention effectual in his restoration, or if they failed in this respect, to smooth his passage to the grave; and subsequent events warrant the conclusion, that Providence had marked out Thirsk to be the place where our deceased brother should put off his ministerial armour, and "cease at once to work and live."

After having been at Thirsk for some time, he was induced, at the earnest request of many of his friends, to go to an hydropathic establishment, to try the efficacy of "the water treatment;" and, accordingly, on August 26, he went to the establishment at Bowness, in Westmoreland, a small village on the borders of the lake Windermear. After having been there more than a month, the claims of the branch, the expense of remaining at Bowness, and the fact that his family was to support in another place, induced him to return home. After his arrival, he continued the treatment through the following winter and spring, and became so much improved, that he, his friends, and his medical adviser thought he was likely to be restored. Agreeably with his own request, the June quarterly meeting of 1846 directed, that on the plan for the following quarter, he should have some sabbath appointments; but, alas! how soon our hopes were blighted, for the first sabbath on which he attempted to preach, he failed, and was never again able to attempt taking any appointment. Henceforward his history furnishes us with little but a continuous train of extreme suffering, emaciation, and disease, until death came to his release.

During the last year of his life, his journal shows, that while his Christian principles and graces were severely tested in the furnace, his soul made considerable advancement in holiness and resignation to the Divine will. He was frequently visited by his brethren in the ministry and other friends, who, being apprized of his delicate state, came to offer him their Christian sympathies, to unite with him in prayer at the throne of grace, and to cheer him in his suffering solitude. On these occasions no subjects seemed to yield him any satisfaction, but those which were religious: indeed, it became a treat to the spiritually-minded to spend an hour or two in his company when he was able to converse. His enlightened and exalted views of Scripture truth, his amazing fertility of mind, his power to grasp lofty ideas and his readiness to describe them, his high toned piety, his abasing and humbling thoughts of himself, his endearing and elevated views of the Saviour, and the passive graces that clearly shone forth in his experience and character, made him at once instructive and admirable, while his-pale and death-like appearance filled the mind of every beholder with awe and grief,

When it had become evident to all observers, that his end drew near, the solicitude of the public increased: all classes anxiously inquired about the stages of his disease, and all grades of society manifested their respect to him by various acts of kindness. It is questionable whether there was a family in Thirsk, who, on knowing that anything they possessed would have conduced to his comfort or relief, would not have cheerfully conferred it, and felt themselves honoured in the act.

But however pleasurable it is to his friends, to remember that he was thus respected and esteemed by those amongst whom he was called to finish his conflict, it is a higher source of gratification to know, that the horizon of his hope gathered brightness as his end approached, and that his sun set in a cloudless sky.

In May last, the circuit's delegate to the district meeting, on his way from the circuit to Middlesbro', called upon our, deceased brother to administer to him any little comfort and help in his power; and how was he refreshed to hear from him the following language: "To use a figure, heaven formerly seemed a long way off; I had it in view; but now it is just at hand; I walk and live on its suburbs every day, holding converse with its inhabitants, and waiting to take possession of its enjoyments." Continuing the conversation, he added, "Tell my brethren, at the district meeting, that I want nothing; I have no request to make; the friends are kind; I have all I need, —the only thing I want is more love to God:" then raising his emaciated arms, he exclaimed, with an emphasis that will not soon be forgotten, "O for a flame of love arising from my heart to God continually!"

On June 10th, he took his pen for the last time, to record in his diary the state of his mind and the prospects that were before him: he observes, "My religious experience does not contain so much of the element of joy as some people would expect; I have peace, but am often under the power of great bodily prostration and nervous lethargy, which render it difficult to feel happy. By reading a selection from Dr. Watts's works on death, I obtained much good: death and I became friends, and I then felt ready at any time to accompany him to eternity.* Previously to that period I did not fear death, but we did not seem to be friendly; but now every barrier seems to be swept away, and the shores of Canaan laid open to my view. For about a fortnight my heart was filled to overflowing with the love of God, day and night praise sat upon my lips, and went up before the throne. My afflictions afterwards became more severe, the lungs began to break up, my lethargies became overwhelming, and it would seem as though the Almighty had been preparing me for my ordeal. For six or eight weeks I was called to walk by faith, and endure an indifference of soul almost insupportable; but, blessed be God, (even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who causeth us to triumph in Christ Jesus,) 'faith failed not.' I have since had occasional glorious manifestations of Divine power and goodness, and shall ultimately win through Christ. Glory be to God for his word! it is marrow and fatness to my soul, it will be my anchor in Jordan, and my passport to glory. My soul is at present in a happy, believing frame." Such were the prospects and feelings of Mr. Watson when he laid down his pen to resume it no more. In a few days afterwards he settled his temporal affairs, by making his last will, in which he appointed guardians for his family; and he evinced his usual serenity, conversed freely with his friends on the subject of death, gave instructions about his funeral, and then added, "My work on earth is done; the Lord may send an angel for me at any time when he pleases." The remaining days of his life were spent in suffering, as a Christian, the will of God. On July 8th, he came down stairs for the last time. He had been dying for several days; but such were his habits of activity and industry, (and they clung to him to the last,) that he could not be confined in bed all day. On the morning of the 9th, Mr. and Mrs. Turner called to see him, when journeying to their new circuit; they found him sinking fast, but still retaining his faculties, and able to articulate answers perfectly satisfactory to Mr. Turner, who prayed with him, and then left him happy in the Lord. In the afterpart of the day it became clear to his attendants that the hour of his departure had come; and Mr. Turner and his wife, who were still in the town, were called to witness the final conflict. And who was more proper to stand in solemn silence, and wipe the sweat from the face of the expiring saint, than a veteran brother, who, like brother Turner, had long been in the same field of toil, laboured with him in close companionship, and interchanged the strongest feelings of love? All present bowed their knees, and the servant of the Lord lifted up his heart before the throne of mercy for his dying brother, that he might be sustained in the swellings of Jordan, and triumphantly landed in the Canaan of rest; and shortly afterwards the last cord which bound the suffering saint to earth was loosed, and his spirit fled to the paradise of God.

Thus died James Watson on the evening of July 9th, 1847, at the age of thirty-four years, leaving a sorrowing widow and three fatherless children. In his death, they have sustained an irreparable loss, the Connexion has been deprived of one of its brightest ornaments, and the world has lost one of the comparatively few who are really calculated to benefit it; but the many that no man can number have gained another voice to swell the anthems of redeeming triumphs, and peal through heaven's wide expanse the melodious chorus, "To him that loved us, and washed us in his own blood, be glory for ever and ever."

On the 15th, he was interred in the Friends' grave-yard at Thirsk; in which he had, prior to his death, secured a resting place for his mortal remains. According to his own previous and special direction, a suitable service of singing, prayer, and exhortation, was performed, by his brethren in the ministry, at the door of his late residence, after the corpse was brought out for interment. At the conclusion of this service, his fellow-labourers in the gospel bore his soul-forsaken tabernacle to the burial, and the mournful procession was accompanied by many friends of different denominations, who had witnessed and admired his consistent Christian life and happy death. At the grave, an address was delivered by one of his friends, and was followed by a second address and prayer from a member of the "Society of Friends;" and thus were committed to the tomb the remains of a great man who, had he continued to live, must have been one of the ruling spirits of his age.

T. Dawson

* No doubt our brother meant that he was ready to accompany death *to the borders* of eternity, and there to leave death, and *enter into eternity*.

References

Primitive Methodist Magazine 1847/646