

THE LIFE OF HENRY MARTYN

John Hall

Edited by Joshua Schwisow



Generations
PASSING ON THE FAITH

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NOTE ON THE TEXT

This new edition of *The Life of Henry Martyn* is based on the original 1832 publication of *The Life of Rev. Henry Martyn*, written by John Hall, and published by the American Sunday School Union. Hall originally compiled this biography using the tenth English edition of the *Memoirs of Mr. Martyn* edited by John Sargent. Readers of this biography will note that it is mostly a compilation of Henry Martyn's own journal entries, with some additional comments and explanatory narrative by John Hall. Hall's purpose in compiling this short biography was, in his own words, to "leave upon the youthful reader a deeper impression of the indispensable need of Divine power, to enable any creature to lead a useful and holy life."

In an effort to make this biography more readable, a number of changes have been made to the text. Many words have been updated to their modern American spelling. Also, when biblical quotations are made in the text, the reference is now provided. The original text contained many biblical quotations, both from John Hall, and from Martyn's journal entries. The original 1832 edition did not provide the references to these quotations.

- Joshua Schwisow, Editor



CHAPTER 1



The father of Henry Martyn was a workman in the tin mines of Cornwall, in England. As the miners worked very deep in the earth, shut out from the light of the sun, and breathing an unwholesome air, it was their custom to labor four hours, and then to spend the same length of time in resting. During these hours of rest, John Martyn devoted himself to improving his education, which had been very slight; and by his industrious application, he soon became so well acquainted with arithmetic, that he was at length engaged as clerk, by a merchant in the town of Truro, in the county of Cornwall. The conduct of this man is an example to all persons whose occupations afford them any leisure. There is scarcely any one who is so constantly occupied, as not to have some time in the week, for the improvement of his mind. Had John Martyn made no exertion to supply his want of early instruction, he would probably have wasted his life in the miserable toil of digging ore, in the unwholesome depths of the mines. But by employing his spare time in learning, instead of wasting it in idleness and intemperance, he was soon enabled to maintain his family respectably, and to save

his children from the evils of ignorance, by giving them a good education.

Henry, his third child, the subject of this volume, was born at Truro, on the 18th of February, 1781, and before he was eight years old, was put under the charge of an excellent school-master. At school he was remarkable for the gentleness of his disposition; yet he was not a general favorite with his school-fellows, as, owing to the mildness of his spirit, he was not inclined to engage in their sports, and was fond of quiet.

After spending seven years at this school, his father sent him to the city of Oxford, hoping that he would be admitted as a student in one of the colleges of the celebrated university at that place, and be supported by funds which are raised for that purpose, called scholarships. From the boys who apply for admission on these terms, the most promising scholars are selected; but Henry had not been very studious, and, though some of his examiners were in favor of electing him, he did not succeed. He afterwards considered this failure as a great mercy; for had he been thrown, when not fifteen years of age, into the evil company which he would then have met with at college, he might have become dissolute beyond recovery. He returned to his school, and remained under the same teacher, until he entered St. John's College, in the University of Cambridge, in October, 1797.

Ambitious to be distinguished, and anxious to gratify his father, he applied himself diligently to study during his stay in college. He was moral and amiable in his conduct, excepting that his temper, which was usually very mild, was sometimes irritated to an improper degree, and led him, as unrestrained passions always lead those who indulge them, to hasty and dangerous conduct. Excellent as his outward character was, it was not so because he was anxious to fulfill his duty to God, who requires purity of heart and life from all his intelligent creatures. And he was so insensible, at this time, to the fact, that God most justly claims that every being should live to his glory, that he thought it a very strange doctrine, when a pious friend told him that he ought to attend to his studies, not for the sake of gaining praise from man, but that he might be the better

qualified to promote the glory of God. He could not, however, but acknowledge that it was entirely reasonable, and determined that he would hold and maintain this opinion, but never once meant that it should govern his conduct. Of course, his holding a correct opinion, without acting accordingly, was worth nothing, and only increased his sinfulness; as he continued to follow his own ambition, after he was convinced that God rightfully claimed all his services.

Thus, many persons are well acquainted with the history, doctrines, and commands of the Holy Scriptures, who do not live according to what they require, and aggravate their guilt, because they sin willfully, after knowing the truth. And thus many believe all that is in the Scriptures, as they believe what is written in other books; but that belief or faith, only, is of any value to a man, which causes him to receive the truth in his heart, as well as in his memory; to live according to its requirements, and to obey the commandment, “repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:15, Acts 16:31); which is just as binding on the whole human family, as any of the Ten Commandments which were given at Sinai.

The great desire of Martyn’s heart was to excel at college, and to be foremost in his class, and this ambition occupied his mind so entirely, that he lived without God, and as if the world had been created for his honor, instead of the Maker’s. His wishes and aims were all selfish; he envied and even hated those who, by greater industry or talents, attained to more distinction than he could reach, whilst, in his pride, he considered himself superior to all, and professed to regard them with contempt. These unholy feelings were so much increased by his disappointment in not gaining as high honors as he aspired to, that upon a visit to his home during a vacation, he used disrespectful language to his father, when he would express opinions differing from his own.

When he became a penitent, and looked back to this period, he exclaimed, “Oh what an example of patience and mildness was he! I love to think of his excellent qualities, and it is frequently the anguish of my heart, that I ever could be so base and wicked, as to pain him by the slightest neglect. Oh my God and Father, why is not my

heart doubly agonized at the remembrance of all my transgressions against Thee, ever since I have known Thee as such!"

During this same visit, which was the last time he saw his father, his pious sister often spoke to him on the subject of religion; but he confessed, that the sound of the gospel, thus tenderly accompanied with the admonitions of a sister, was grating to his ears. Yet he could not escape the conviction that she spoke the truth, when she urged its claims upon him; but then it required him to sacrifice his selfish ambition, and this was too dear an object to give up. He promised to read the Bible, but when he reached college, his studies filled all his thoughts.

Notwithstanding the fact, which he afterwards acknowledged, that during his stay at home the wickedness of his heart rose to a greater height than at any other time, yet the change which soon afterwards took place in him, seems to have been connected with the peculiar state of his circumstances and feelings at that period. At an examination after his return to college, his ambition attained its object, and he was pronounced first in his class.

A few weeks afterwards, he received information of the sudden death of his father. This was a great affliction to him, and was more severe, as it happened in the midst of his triumph, and brought to his remembrance the acts of filial disrespect which his evil passions had led him so lately to commit. Finding that in this state of mind, he could take no pleasure in his usual studies, he resorted to his Bible, under the impression that its perusal would be more suitable to his present feelings. In this new direction of his inquiries he was encouraged by his pious friend at college, and commenced reading Luke's narrative of the Acts of the Apostles.

This led him gradually to examine the doctrines of those holy men; and the duty of religion, in the circumstances of his affliction, made this much of an impression, that he began to use prayers, and to ask formally for pardon, though he had little sense of his sinfulness. His heart was evidently softened by the occurrence of his father's death; and the admonitions and prayers of his sister, with the convictions of his own judgment, disposed him to pay attention

to the subject, from which he was not violently drawn away, as formerly, by his pursuit of fame, having now reached the highest station to which he could attain in his class. But his pride caused him to shrink from the humility which every sinner must feel before he can come to the Savior: so little did he yet know his own heart; for the man who truly feels the condition in which he stands in the sight of a Supreme Being, infinitely great, infinitely holy, infinitely just, against whose laws, and mercy, and goodness, he has sinned without excuse, cannot but be humble when he becomes acquainted with his true character.

Such was the apparent commencement of the influence of the Holy Spirit on Martyn's heart; and although on his return to Cambridge, those sacred impressions were in danger of being destroyed by his diligent application to the study of mathematics, which once more threatened to engage his whole attention, yet the divine mercy preserved him in the trial. Some passages in a letter written to his sister at this period, show that religion must have entered into his daily thoughts, and that he was already brought to see the reasonableness and beauty of spiritual devotion.

“What a blessing it is for me, that I have such a sister as you, my dear S___, who have been so instrumental in keeping me in the right way. When I consider how little human assistance you have had, and the great knowledge to which you have attained on the subject of religion, especially observing the extreme ignorance of the most wise and learned of this world, I think this is itself a proof of the wonderful influence of the Holy Ghost on the minds of well-disposed persons. It is certainly by the Spirit alone that we can have the will, or power, or knowledge, or confidence to pray; and by Him alone we come unto the Father through Jesus Christ. ‘Through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father’ (Eph. 2:18). How I rejoice to find that we disagreed only about words! I did not doubt, as you suppose, at all about that joy which true believers feel. Can there be any one subject, any one source of cheerfulness and joy, at all to be compared with the heavenly serenity and comfort which such a person must find in holding communion with his God and Savior

in prayer; in addressing God as his Father, and more than all, in the transporting hope of being preserved unto everlasting life, and of singing praises to his Redeemer when time shall be no more? Oh! I do indeed feel this state of mind at times; but at other times I feel quite humbled at finding myself so cold and hard-hearted. That reluctance to prayer, that unwillingness to come unto God, who is the fountain of all good, when reason and experience tell us, that with him only true pleasure is to be found, seem to be owing to Satanic influence.”

After mentioning that his mathematical studies required such deep thought as to exclude, for the time, every other subject from the mind, and that they were, on this account, very dangerous to him, he speaks in the same letter of the beginning of his religious feelings.

“After the death of our father, you know I was extremely low-spirited; and, like most other people, began to consider seriously, without any particular determination, that invisible world to which he was gone, and to which I must one day go. Yet I still read the Bible unenlightened; and said a prayer or two rather through terror of a superior power than from any other cause. Soon, however, I began to attend more diligently to the words of our Savior in the New Testament, and to devour them with delight; when the offers of mercy and forgiveness were made so freely, I supplicated to be made partaker of the covenant of grace with eagerness and hope: and thanks be to the ever-blessed Trinity for not leaving me without comfort. Throughout the whole, however, even when the light of divine truth was beginning to dawn on my mind, I was not under that great terror of future punishment, which I now see plainly I had every reason to feel: I look back now upon that course of wickedness which, like a gulf of destruction, yawned to swallow me up, with a trembling delight, mixed with shame at having lived so long in ignorance, and error, and blindness. I could say much more, but I have no more room. I have only to express my acquiescence in most of your opinions, and to join with you in gratitude to God for his mercies to us: may he preserve you and me and all of us to the day of the Lord!”