

GEORGE MUELLER OF BRISTOL
AND HIS WITNESS TO A PRAYER-HEARING GOD
1899

The originally "authorized memoir".

BY
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Trials Of Faith And Helpers To Faith

God has His own mathematics: witness that miracle of the loaves and fishes. Our Lord said to His disciples: "Give ye them to eat," and as they divided, He multiplied, the scanty provision; as they subtracted from it He added to it; as they decreased it by distributing, He increased it for distributing. And it has been beautifully said of all holy partnerships, that griefs shared are divided, and joys shared are multiplied.

We have already seen how the prayer circle had been enlarged. The founder of the orphan work, at the first, had only God for his partner, telling Him alone his own wants or the needs of his work. Later on, a very few, including his own wife, Mr. Craik, and one or two helpers, were permitted to know the condition of the funds and supplies. Later still, in the autumn of 1838, he began to feel that he ought more fully to open the doors of his confidence to his associates in the Lord's business. Those who shared in the toils should also share in the prayers, and therefore in the knowledge of the needs which prayer was to supply; else how could they fully be partakers of the faith, the work, and the reward? Or, again, how could they feel the full proof of the presence and power of God in the answers to prayer, know the joy of the Lord which such answers inspire, or praise Him for the deliverance which such answers exhibit? It seemed plain that, to the highest glory of God, they must know the depths of need, the extremities of want out of which God had lifted them, and ascribe all honour and praise to His name.

Accordingly Mr. Mueller called together all the beloved brothers and sisters linked with him in the conduct of the work, and fully stated the case, keeping nothing back. He showed them the distress they were in, while he bade them be of good courage, assuring them of his own confidence that help was nigh at hand, and then united them with himself and the smaller praying circle which had previously existed, in supplication to Jehovah Jireh.

The step thus taken was of no small importance to all concerned. A considerable number of praying believers henceforth added to the band of intercessors that gave God no rest day nor night. While Mr. Mueller withheld no facts as to the straits to which the work was reduced, he laid down certain principles which from time to time were reiterated as

unchanging laws for the conduct of the Lord's business. For example, nothing must be bought, whatever the extremity, for which there was not money in hand to pay: and yet it must be equally a settled principle that the children must not be left to lack anything needful; for better that the work cease, and the orphans be sent away, than that they be kept in a nominal home where they were really left to suffer from hunger or nakedness.

Again, nothing was ever to be revealed to outsiders of existing need, lest it should be construed into an appeal for help; but the only resort must be to the living God. The helpers were often reminded that the supreme object of the institutions, founded in Bristol, was to prove God's fulness and the perfect safety of trusting solely to His promises; jealousy for Him must therefore restrain all tendency to look to man for help. Moreover, they were earnestly besought to live in such daily and hourly fellowship with God as that their own unbelief and disobedience might not risk either their own power in prayer, or the agreement, needful among them, in order to common supplication. One discordant note may prevent the harmonious symphony of united prayer, and so far hinder the acceptableness of such prayer with God.

Thus informed and instructed, these devoted coworkers, with the beloved founder of the orphan work, met the crisis intelligently. If, when there were *no funds*, there must be *no leaning upon man*, *no debt* incurred, and yet *no lack* allowed, clearly the only resort or resource must be waiting upon the unseen God; and so, in these straits and in every succeeding crisis, they went to Him alone. The orphans themselves were never told of any existing need; in every case their wants were met, though they knew not how. The barrel of meal might be empty, yet there was always a handful when needed, and the cruse of oil was never so exhausted that a few drops were not left to moisten the handful of meal. Famine and drought never reached the Bristol orphanage: the supplies might come slowly and only for one day at a time, but somehow, when the need was urgent and could no longer wait, there was enough-- though it might be barely enough to meet the want.

It should be added here, as completing this part of the Narrative, that, in August, 1840, this circle of prayer was still further enlarged by admitting to its intimacies of fellowship and supplication the brethren and sisters who laboured in the day-schools, the same solemn injunctions being repeated in their case against any betrayal to outsiders of the crises that might arise.

To impart the knowledge of affairs to so much larger a band of helpers brought in every way a greater blessing, and especially so to the helpers themselves. Their earnest, believing, importunate prayers were thus called forth, and God only knows how much the consequent progress of the work was due to their faith, supplication, and self-denial. The practical knowledge of the exigencies of their common experience begat an unselfishness of spirit which prompted these acts of heroic sacrifice that have no human record or written history, and can be known only when the pages of the Lord's own journal are read by an assembled universe in the day when the secret things are brought to light. It has, since Mr. Mueller's departure, transpired how large a share of the donations received are to be traced to him; but there is no means of ascertaining as to the aggregate amount of

the secret gifts of his coworkers in this sacred circle of prayer.

We do know, however, that Mr. Mueller was not the only self-denying giver, though he may lead the host. His true yoke-fellows often *turned the crisis* by their own offerings, which though small were costly! Instrumentally they were used of God to relieve existing want by their gifts, for out of the abundance of their deep poverty abounded the riches of their liberality. The money they gave was sometimes like the widow's two mites-- all their living; and not only the last penny, but ornaments, jewels, heirlooms, long kept and cherished treasures, like the alabaster flask of ointment which was broken upon the feet of Jesus, were laid down on God's altar as a willing sacrifice. They gave all they could spare and often what could ill spare, so that there might be meat in God's house and no lack of bread or other needed supplies for His orphans. In a sublime sense this work was not Mr. Mueller's only but theirs also, who with him took part in prayers and tears, in cares and toils, in self-denials and self-offerings, whereby God chose to carry forward His plans for these homeless waifs! It was in thus *giving* that all the helpers found also new power, assurance, and blessing in *praying*; for, as one of them said, he felt that it would scarcely be "*upright to pray, except he were to give what he had.*"*

*Narrative, 1:246.

The helpers, thus admitted into Mr. Mueller's confidence came into more active sympathy with him and the work and partook increasingly of the same spirit. Of this some few instances and examples have found their way into his journal.

A gentleman and some ladies visiting the orphan house saw the large number of little ones to be cared for. One of the ladies said to the matron of the Boys' House: "Of course you cannot carry on these institutions without a good stock of funds"; and the gentleman added, "Have you a good stock?" The quiet answer was, "Our funds are deposited in a bank which cannot break." The reply drew tears from the eyes of the lady, and a gift of five pounds from the pocket of the gentleman-- a donation most opportune, as there was *not one penny then in hand.*

Fellow labourers such as these, who asked nothing for themselves, but cheerfully looked to the Lord for their own supplies, and willingly parted with their own money of goods in the hour of need, filled Mr. Mueller's heart with praise to God, and held up his hands, as Aaron and Hur sustained those of Moses, till the sun of his life went down. During all the years of his superintendence these were the main human support of his faith and courage. They met with him in daily prayer, faithfully kept among themselves the secrets of the Lord's work in the great trials of faith; and, when the hour of triumph came, they felt it both duty and privilege in the annual report to publish their deliverance, to make their boast in God, that all men might know His love and faithfulness and ascribe Him glory.

From time to time, in connection with the administration of the work, various questions arose which have a bearing on all departments of Christian service, for their solution enters into what may be called the ethics and economics of the Lord's work. At a few of these we may glance.

As the Lord was dealing with them by the day, it seemed clear that they were to *live by the day*. No dues should be allowed to accumulate, even such as would naturally accrue from ordinary weekly supplies of bread, milk, etc. From the middle of September, 1838, it was therefore determined that every article bought was to be paid for at the time.

Again, rent became due in stated amounts and at stated times. This want was therefore not unforeseen, and, looked at in one aspect, rent was due daily or weekly, though collected at longer intervals. The principle having been laid that no debt should be incurred, it was considered as implying that the amount due for rent should be *put aside* daily, or at least weekly, even though not then payable. This rule was henceforth adopted, with this understanding, that money thus laid aside was sacred to that end, and not to be drawn upon, even temporarily, for any other.

Notwithstanding such conscientiousness and consistency the trial of faith and patience continued. Money came in only in small sums, and barely enough with rigid economy to meet each day's wants. The outlook was often most dark and the prospect most threatening; but *no real need ever failed to be supplied*: and so praise was continually mingled with prayer, the incense of thanksgiving making fragrant the flame of supplication. God's interposing power and love could not be doubted, and in fact made the more impression as unquestionable facts, because help came so frequently at the hour of extremity, and in the exact form or amount needed. Before the provision was entirely exhausted, there came new supplies or the money wherewith to buy, so that these many mouths were always fed and these many bodies always clad.

To live up to such principles as had been laid down was not possible without faith, kept in constant and lively exercise. For example, in the closing months of 1838 God seemed purposely putting them to a severe test whether or not they *did trust Him alone*. The orphan work was in continual straits: at times not one half-penny was in the hands of the matrons in the three houses. But not only was no knowledge of such facts ever allowed to leak out, or any hint of the extreme need ever given to outsiders, *but even those who inquired, with intent to aid, were not informed*.

One evening a brother ventured to ask how the balance would stand when the next accounts were made up, and whether it would be as great in favour of the orphans when the previous balance-sheet had been prepared. Mr. Mueller's calm but evasive answer was:

"It will be as great as the Lord pleases."

This was no intentional rudeness. To have said more would have been turning from the one Helper to make at least an indirect appeal to man for help; and every such snare was carefully avoided lest the one great aim should be lost sight of:

to prove to all men that it is safe to trust only in the Living God.

While admitting the severity of the straits to which the whole work of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution was often brought, Mr. Mueller takes pains to assure his readers that these straits were never a surprise to him, and that expectations in the matter of funds were not disappointed, but rather the reverse. He had looked for great emergencies as essential to his full witness to a prayer-hearing God. The almighty Hand can never be clearly seen while any human help is sought for or is in sight. We must turn absolutely away from all else if we to turn fully unto the living God. The deliverance is signal, only in proportion as the danger is serious, and is significant when, without God, we face absolute despair. Hence the exact end for which the whole work mainly begun could be attained only through such conditions of extremity and such experiences of interposition in extremity.

Some who have known but little of the interior history of the orphan work have very naturally accounted for the regularity of supplies by supposing that the public statements, made about it by word of mouth, and especially by pen in the printed annual reports, have constituted *appeals for aid*. Unbelief would interpret all God's working however wonderful, by "natural laws," and the carnal mind, refusing to see in any of the manifestations of God's power any supernatural force at work, persists in thus explaining away all the "miracles of prayer."

No doubt humane and sympathetic hearts have been strongly moved by the remarkable ways in which God has day by day provided for all these orphans, as well as the branches of work of the Scriptural Knowledge Institution; and believing souls have been drawn into loving and hearty sympathy with work so conducted, and been led to become its helpers. It is a well-known fact that God has used these annual reports to accomplish much results. Yet it remains true that these reports were never intended or issued as appeals for aid, and no dependence has been placed upon them for securing timely help. It is also undeniable that, however frequent their issue, wide their circulation, or great their influence, the regularity and abundance of the supplies of all needs must in some other way be accounted for.

Only a few days after public meetings were held or printed reports issued, funds often fell to their lowest ebb. Mr. Mueller and his helpers were singularly kept from all undue leaning upon any such indirect appeals, and frequently and definitely asked God that they might never be left to look for any inflow of means through such channels. For many reasons the Lord's dealings with them were made known, the main object of such publicity always being a *testimony to the faithfulness of God*. This great object Mr. Mueller always kept foremost, hoping and praying that, by such records and revelations of God's fidelity to His promises, and of the manner in which He met each new need, his servant might awaken, quicken, and stimulate faith in Him as the Living God. One has only to read these reports to see the conspicuous absence of any appeal for human aid, or of any attempt to excite pity, sympathy and compassion toward the orphans. The burden of every report is to induce the reader to venture wholly upon God, to taste and see that the Lord is good, and find for himself how blessed are all they that put their trust in Him. Only in the light of this supreme purpose can these records of a life of faith be read intelligently and intelligibly.

Weakness of body again, in the autumn of 1839, compelled, for a time, rest from active labour, and Mr. Mueller went to Trowbridge and Exeter, Teignmouth and Plymouth. God had precious lessons for him which He could best teach in the school of affliction.

While at Plymouth Mr. Mueller felt anew the impulse to *early rising* for purposes of devotional communion. At Halle he had been an early riser, influenced by zeal for excellence in study. Afterwards, when his weak head and feeble nerves made more sleep seem needful, he judged that, even when he rose late, the day would be long enough to exhaust his little fund of strength; and so often he lay in bed till six or even seven o'clock, instead of rising at four; and after dinner took a nap for a quarter-hour. It grew upon him, however, that he was losing in spiritual vigour, and that his soul's health was declining under this new regimen. The work now so pressed upon him as to prevent proper reading of the Word and rob him of leisure for secret prayer.

A "chance remark"-- there is no *chance* in a believer's life!-- made by the brother at whose house he was abiding at Plymouth, much impressed him. Referring to the sacrifices in Leviticus, he said that, as the refuse of the animals was never offered up on the altar, but only the best parts and the fat, so the choicest of our time and strength, the best parts of our day, should be especially given to the Lord in worship and communion. George Mueller meditated much on this; and determined, even at the risk of damage to bodily health, that he would no longer spend his hours in bed. Henceforth he allowed himself but *seven hours' sleep* and gave up his after-dinner rest. This resumption of early rising secured long seasons of uninterrupted interviews with God, in prayer and meditation on the Scriptures, before breakfast and the various inevitable interruptions that followed. He found himself not worse but better, physically, and became convinced that to have lain longer in bed as before would have kept his nerves weak; and, as to spiritual life, such new vitality and vigour accrued from thus waiting upon God while others slept, that it continued to be the habit of his after-life.

In November, 1839, when the needs were again great and the supplies very small, he was kept in peace: "I was not," he says, looking at the *little in hand, but at the fulness of God.*"

It was his rule to empty himself of all that he had in order to greater boldness in appealing for help from above. All needless articles were sold if a market could be found. But what was useful in the Lord's work he did not reckon as needless, nor regard it right to sell, since the Father knew the need. One of his fellow labourers had put forward his valuable watch as a security for the return of money laid by for rent, but drawn upon for the time; yet even this plan was not felt to be scriptural, as the watch might be reckoned among articles needful and useful in the Lord's service, and, if such expedients were quite abandoned, the deliverance would be more manifest of the Lord. And so, one by one, all resorts were laid aside that might imperil full trust and sole dependence upon the one and only Helper.

When the poverty of their resources seemed most pinching, Mr. Mueller still comforted

himself with the daily proof that God had not forgotten, and would day by day feed them with "the bread of their convenience." Often he said to himself,

"If it is even a proverb of the world that 'Man's necessity is God's opportunity,' how much more may God's own dear children in their great need look to Him to make their extremity the fit moment to display His love and power!"

In February, 1840, another attack of ill health combined with a mission to Germany to lead Mr. Mueller for five weeks to the Continent. At Heimersleben, where he found his father weakened by a serious cough, the two rooms in which he spent most time in prayer and reading the Word, and confession of the Lord, were the same which, nearly twenty years before, he had passed most time as an unreconciled sinner against God and man. Later on, at Wolfenbüttel, he saw the inn whence in 1821 he away in debt. In taking leave once more of his father he was pierced by a keen anguish, fearing it was his last farewell, and an unusual tenderness and affection were now exhibited by his father, whom he yearned more and more to know as safe in the Lord Jesus, and depending no longer on outward and formal religiousness, or substituting the reading of prayers and of Scripture for an inward conformity to Christ. This proved the last interview, for the father died on March 30th of the same year.

The main purpose of this journey to Germany was to send forth more missionaries to the East. At Sandersleben Mr. Mueller met his friend, Mr. Stahlshmidt, and found a little band of disciples meeting in secret to evade police. Those who have always breathed the atmosphere of religious liberty know little of such intolerance as, in that nominally Christian land, stifled all freedom of worship. Eleven years before, when Mr. Stahlshmidt's servant had come to this place, he had found scarce one true disciple beside his master. The first meetings had been literally of but two or three, and, when they had grown a little larger, Mr. Kroll was summoned before the magistrates and, like the apostles in the first days of the church, forbidden to speak in His name. But again, like those same primitive disciples, believing that they were to obey God rather than men, the believing band had continued to meet, notwithstanding police raids which were so disturbing, and government fines which were so exact. So secret, however, were their assemblies, as to have neither stated place nor regular time.

George Mueller found these persecuted believers, meeting in the room of a humble weaver where there was but one chair. The twenty-five or thirty who were present found such places to sit or stand as they might, in and about the loom, which itself filled half the space.

In Halberstadt Mr. Mueller found seven large Protestant churches without clergyman who gave evidence of true conversion, and the few genuine disciples there were likewise forbidden to meet together.

A few days after returning to Bristol from his few weeks in Germany, and at a time of great financial distress in the work, a letter reached him from a brother who had often before given money, as follows:

"Have you any *present* need for the Institution under your care? I know you do not *ask*, except indeed of Him whose work you are doing; but to *answer when asked* seems another thing, and a right thing. I have a reason for desiring to know the present state of your means towards the objects you are labouring to serve: viz., should you not have need, other departments of the Lord's work, or other people of the Lord, *may have* need. Kindly then inform me, and to what amount, i.e. what amount you at this present time need or can profitably lay out."

To most men, even those who carry on a work of faith and prayer, such a letter would have been at least a temptation. But Mr. Mueller did not waver. To announce even to an inquirer the exact needs of the work would, in his opinion, involve two serious risks:

1. It would turn his own eyes away from God to man;
2. It would turn the minds of saints away from dependence solely upon Him.

This man of God had staked everything upon one great experiment-- he had set himself to prove that the prayer which *resorts to God only* will bring help in every crisis, even when the crisis is unknown to His people whom He uses as the means of relief and help.

At this time there remained in hand but twenty-seven pence ha'penny, in all, to meet the needs of hundreds of orphans. Nevertheless this was the reply to the letter:

"Whilst I thank you for your love, and whilst I agree with you that, in general, there is a difference between *asking for money* and *answering when asked*, nevertheless, in our case, I feel not at liberty to speak about the state of our funds, as the primary object of the work in my hands is to lead those who are weak in faith to see that there is *reality* in dealing with God *alone*."

Consistently with his position, however, no sooner was the answer posted than the appeal went up to the Living God:

"Lord, thou knowest that, for Thy sake, I did not tell this brother about our need. Now, Lord, show afresh that there is reality in speaking to Thee only, about our need, and speak therefore to this brother so that he may help us."

In answer, God moved this inquiring brother to donate one hundred pounds, which came when *not one penny was in hand*.

The confidence of faith, long tried, had its increasing reward and was strengthened, by experience. In July, 1845, Mr. Mueller gave this testimony reviewing these very years of trial:

"Though for about seven years, our funds have been so exhausted that it has been comparatively a rare case that there have been means in hand to meet the necessities of the orphans *for three days* together, yet I have been only once tried in spirit, and that was

on September 18, 1838, when the first time the Lord seemed not to regard our prayer. But when He did send help at that time, and I saw that it was only for the trial of our faith, and not because He had forsaken the work, that we were brought so low, my soul was so strengthened and encouraged that I have not only not been allowed to distrust the Lord since that time, but I have not even been cast down when in the deepest poverty."