

From His Birth To His New Birth

The originally "authorized memoir".

BY
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A HUMAN life, filled with the presence and power of God, is one of God's choicest gifts to His church and to the world.

Things which are unseen and eternal seem, to the carnal man, distant and indistinct, while what is seen and temporal is vivid and real. Practically, any object in nature that can be seen or felt is thus more real and actual to most men than the Living God. Every man who walks with God, and finds Him a present Help in every time of need; who puts His promises to the practical proof and verifies them in actual experience; every believer who with the key of faith unlocks God's mysteries, and with the key of prayer unlocks God's treasures, thus furnishes to the race a demonstration and an illustration of the fact that "He is, and is a Rewarder of them that diligently seek Him."

George Müller was such an argument and example incarnated in human flesh. Here was a man of like passions as we are and tempted in all points like as we are, but who believed God and was established by believing; who prayed earnestly that he might live a life and do a work which should be a convincing proof that God hears prayer and that it is safe to trust Him at all times; and who has furnished just such a witness as he desired. Like Enoch, he truly walked with God, and had abundant testimony borne to him that he pleased God. And when on the tenth day of March, 1898, it was told us of George Müller that "he was not," we knew that "God had taken him": it seemed more like a translation than like death.

To those who are familiar with his long life-story, and, most of all, to those who intimately knew him and felt the power of personal contact with him, he was one of God's ripest saints and himself a living proof that a life of faith is possible; that God may be known, communed with, found, and may become a conscious companion in the daily life. George Müller proved for himself and for all others who will receive his witness that, to those who are willing to take God at His word and to yield self to His will, He is the same yesterday and today and forever": that the days of divine intervention and deliverance are past only to those with whom the days of faith and obedience are past-- in a word, that believing prayer works still the wonders which our fathers told of in the days of old.

The life of this man may best be studied, perhaps, by dividing it into certain marked periods, into which it naturally falls, when we look at those leading events

and experiences which like punctuation-marks or paragraph divisions,-- as, for example:

1. From his birth to his new birth or conversion: 1805-1825.
2. From his conversion to full entrance on his life-work: 1825-35.
3. From this point to the period of his mission tours: 1835-75.
4. From the beginning to the close of these tours: 1875-92.
5. From the close of his tours to his death: 1892-98.

Thus the first period would cover twenty years; the second, ten ; the third, forty ; the fourth, seventeen; and the last, six. However thus unequal in length, each formed a sort of epoch, marked by certain conspicuous and characteristic features which serve to distinguish it and make its lessons peculiarly important and memorable.

For example, the first period is that of the lost days of sin, in which the great lesson taught is the bitterness and worthlessness of a disobedient life. In the second period may be traced the remarkable steps of preparation for the great work of his life. The third period embraces the actual working out of the divine mission committed to him. Then for seventeen or eighteen years we find him bearing in all parts of the earth his world-wide witness to God; and the last six years were used of God in mellowing and maturing his Christian character.

During these years he was left in peculiar loneliness, yet this only made him lean more on the divine companionship, and it was noticeable with those who brought into most intimate contact with him that he was more than ever before heavenly-minded, and the beauty of the Lord his God was upon him.

The first period may be passed rapidly by, for it covers only the wasted years of a sinful and profligate youth and early manhood. It is of interest mainly as illustrating the sovereignty of that Grace which abounds even to the chief of sinners. Who can read the story of that score of years and yet talk of piety as the product of evolution? In his case, instead of evolution, there was rather a *revolution*, as marked and complete as ever was found, perhaps, in the annals of salvation. If Lord George Lyttelton could account for the conversion of Saul of Tarsus only by supernatural power, what would he have thought of George Müller's transformation? Saul had in his favor a conscience, however misguided, and a morality, however pharisaic. George Müller was a flagrant sinner against common honesty and decency, and his whole early career was a revolt, not against God only, but against his own moral sense. If Saul was a hardened transgressor, how callous must have been George Müller!

He was a native of Prussia, born at Kroppenstaedt, near Halberstadt, September 27, 1805. Less than five years later his parents removed to Heimersleben, some four miles off, where his father was made collector of the excise, again removing about eleven years later to Schoenebeck, near Magdeburg, where he had obtained another appointment.

George Müller had no proper parental training. His father's favoritism toward him was harmful both to himself and to his brother, as in the family of Jacob, tending to jealousy and estrangement. Money was put too freely into the hands of these boys, hoping that they might learn how to use it and save it; but the result was, rather, careless and vicious waste, for it became the source of many childish sins of indulgence. Worse still, when called upon to render any account of their stewardship, sins of lying and deception were used to cloak wasteful spending. Young George systematically deceived his father, either by false entries of what he had received, or by false statements of what he had spent or had on hand. When his tricks were found out, the punishment which followed led to no reformation, the only effect being more ingenious devices of trickery and fraud. Like the Spartan lad, George Müller reckoned it no fault to steal, but only to have his theft found out.

His own brief account of his boyhood shows a very bad boy and he attempts no disguise. Before he was ten years old he was a habitual thief and an expert at cheating; even government funds, entrusted to his father, were not safe from his hands. Suspicion led to the laying of a snare into which he fell: a sum of money was carefully counted and put where he would find it and have a chance to steal it. He took it and hid it under his foot in his shoe, but, he being searched and the money being found, it became clear to whom the various sums previously missing might be traced.

His father wished him educated for a clergyman, and before he was eleven he was sent to the cathedral classical school at Halberstadt to be fitted for the university. That such a lad should be deliberately set apart for such a sacred office and calling, by a father who knew his moral obliquities and offences, seems incredible; but, where a state church exists, the ministry of the Gospel is apt to be treated as a human profession rather than as a divine vocation, and so the standards of fitness often sink to the low secular level, and the main object in view becomes the so-called "living," which is, alas, too frequently independent of holy living.

From this time the lad's studies were mixed up with novel-reading and various vicious indulgences. Card-playing and even strong drink got hold of him. The night when his mother lay dying, her boy of fourteen was reeling through the streets, drunk; and even her death failed to arrest his wicked course or to arouse his sleeping conscience. And-- as must always be the case when such solemn reminders make one no better-- he only grew worse.

When he came to the age for confirmation he had to attend the class for preparatory religious teaching; but this being to him a mere form, and met in a careless spirit, another false step was taken: sacred things were treated as common, and so conscience became the more callous. On the very eve of confirmation and of his first approach to the Lord's Table he was guilty of gross sins; and on the day previous, when he met the clergyman for the customary "confession of sin," he planned and practised another shameless fraud, withholding from him eleven-twelfths of the confirmation fee entrusted to him by his father.

In such frames of mind and with such habits of life George Müller, in the Easter season of 1820, was confirmed and became a communicant. Confirmed, indeed! but in sin, not only immoral and unregenerate, but so ignorant of the very rudiments of the Gospel of Christ that he could not have stated to an inquiring soul the simple terms of the plan of salvation. There was, it is true about such serious and sacred transactions, a vague solemnity which left a transient impression and led to shallow resolves to live a better life; but there was no real sense of sin or of repentance toward God, nor was there any dependence upon a higher strength: and, without these, efforts at self-amendment never prove of value or work lasting results.

The story of this wicked boyhood presents but little variety, except that of sin and crime. It is one long tale of evil-doing and of the sorrow which it brings. Once, when his money was all recklessly wasted, hunger drove him to steal a bit of coarse bread from a soldier who was a fellow lodger; and looking back, long afterward, to that hour of extremity, he exclaimed, "What a bitter thing is the service of Satan, even in this world!"

On his father's removal to Schoenebeck in 1821 he asked to be sent to the cathedral school at Magdeburg, inwardly hoping thus to break away from his sinful snares and vicious companions, and, amid new scenes, find help in self-reform. He was not, therefore, without at least occasional aspirations after moral improvement; but again he made the common and fatal mistake of overlooking the Source of all true betterment. "God was not in all his thoughts." He found that to leave one place for another was not to leave his sin behind, for he took himself along.

His father, with a strange fatuity, left him to superintend sundry alterations in his house at Heimersleben, arranging for him meanwhile to read classics with the resident clergyman, Rev. Dr. Nagel. Being thus for a time his own master, temptation opened wide doors before him. He was allowed to collect dues from his father's debtors, and again he resorted to fraud, spending large sums of this money and concealing the fact that it had been paid.

In November, 1821, he went to Magdeburg and to Brunswick, to which latter place he was drawn by his passion for a young Roman Catholic girl whom he

had met there soon after confirmation. In this absence from home he took one step after another in the path of wicked indulgence. First of all, by lying to his tutor he got his consent to his going; then came a week of sin at Magdeburg and a wasting of his father's means at a costly hotel in Brunswick. His money being gone, he went to the house of an uncle until he was sent away; then, at another expensive hotel, he ran up bills until, payment being demanded, he had to leave his best clothes as a security, barely escaping arrest. Then, at Wolfenbüttel, he tried the same bold scheme again, until, having nothing for deposit, he ran off, but this time was caught and sent to jail. This boy of sixteen was already a liar and thief, swindler and drunkard, accomplished only in crime, companion of convicted felons and himself in a felon's cell. This cell, a few days later, a thief shared: and these two held converse as fellow thieves, relating their adventures to one another, and young Müller, that he might not be outdone, invented lying tales of villainy to make himself out the more famous fellow of the two!

Ten or twelve days passed in this wretched fellowship, until disagreement led to a sullen silence between them. And so passed away twenty-four dark days, from December 18, 1821, until the 12th of January ensuing, during all of which George Müller was shut up in prison and during part of which he sought as a favour the company of a thief.

His father learned of his disgrace and sent money to meet his hotel dues and other "costs" and pay for his return home. Yet such was his persistent wickedness that, going from a convict's cell to confront his outraged but indulgent parent, he chose as his companion in travel an avowedly wicked man. He was severely chastised by his father and felt that he first make some effort to reinstate himself in his favour. He therefore studied hard and took pupils in arithmetic and German, French and Latin. This outward reform so pleased his father that he shortly forgot as well as forgave his evil-doing; but again it was only the outside of the cup and platter that was made clean: the secret heart was still desperately wicked and the whole life, as God saw it, was an abomination.

George Müller now began to forge what he afterward called "a whole chain of lies." When his father would no longer consent to his staying at home, he left, ostensibly for Halle, the university town, to be examined, but really for Nordhausen to seek entrance into the gymnasium. He avoided Halle because he dreaded its severe discipline, and foresaw that restraint would be doubly irksome when constantly meeting young fellows of his acquaintance who, as students in the university, would have much more freedom than himself. On returning home he tried to conceal this fraud from his father; but just before he was to leave again for Nordhausen the truth became known, which made needful new links in that chain of lies to account for his systematic disobedience and deception. His father, though angry, permitted him to go to Nordhausen, where he remained from October, 1822, till Easter, 1825.

During these two and a half years he studied clerics, French, history, etc., living

with the director of the gymnasium. His conduct so improved that he rose in favour and was pointed to as an example for the other lads, and permitted to accompany the master in his walks, to converse with him in Latin. By this time he was a hard student, rising at four A.M. the year through, and applying himself to his books till ten at night.

Nevertheless, by his confession, behind all this formal propriety there lay secret sin and utter alienation from God. His vices induced an illness which for thirteen weeks kept him in his room. He was not without a religious bent, which led to the reading of such books as Klopstock's works, but he neither cared for God's word, nor had he any compunction for trampling upon God's law. In his library, now numbering about three hundred books, no Bible was found. Cicero and Horace, Molière Voltaire, he knew and valued, but of the Holy Scriptures he was grossly ignorant, and as indifferent to them as he was ignorant of them.

Twice a year, according to prevailing custom, he went to the Lord's Supper, like others who had passed the age of confirmation, and he could not at such seasons quite avoid religious impressions. When the consecrated bread and wine touched his lips he would sometimes take an oath to reform, and for a few days refrain from some open sins; but there was no spiritual life to act as a force within, and his vows were forgotten almost as soon as made. The old Satan was too strong for the young Müller, and, when the mighty passions of his evil nature were roused, his resolves and endeavours were so powerless to hold him as were the new cords which bound Samson, to restrain him, when he awoke from his slumber.

It is hard to believe that this young man of twenty could lie without a blush and with the air of perfect candor. When dissipation dragged him into the mire of debt, and his allowance would not help him out, he resorted again to the most ingenious devices of falsehood. He pretended that the money wasted in riotous living had been stolen by violence, and, to carry out the deception he studied the part of an actor. Forcing the locks of his trunk and guitar-case, he ran into the director's room half dressed and feigning fright, declaring that he was the victim of a robbery, and excited such pity that friends made up a purse to cover his supposed losses. Suspicion was, however, awakened that he had been playing a false part, and he never regained the master's confidence; and though he had even then no sense of sin, shame at being detected in such meanness and hypocrisy made him shrink from ever again facing the director's wife, who, in his long sickness, had nursed him like a mother.

Such was the man who was not only admitted to honourable standing as a university student, but accepted as a candidate for holy orders, with permission to preach in the Lutheran establishment. This student of divinity knew nothing of God or salvation, and was ignorant even of the gospel plan of saving grace. He felt the need for a better life, but no godly motives swayed him. Reformation was a matter purely of expediency: to continue in profligacy would bring final

exposure, and no parish would have him as a pastor. To get a valuable "cure" and a good "living" he must make attainments in divinity, pass a good examination, and have at least a decent reputation. Worldly policy urged him to apply himself on the one hand to his studies and on the other to self-reform.

Again he met defeat, for he had never yet found the one Source and secret of all strength. Scarce had he entered Halle before his resolves proved frail as a spider's web, not able to restrain him from vicious indulgences. He refrained indeed from street brawls and duelling, because they would curtail his liberty, but he knew as yet no moral restraints. His money was soon spent, and he borrowed till he could find no one to lend, and then pawned his watch and clothes. He could not but be wretched, for it was plain to what a goal of poverty and misery, dishonour and disgrace, such paths lead. Policy loudly urged him to abandon his evil-doing, but piety had as yet no voice in his life. He went so far, however, as to choose for a friend a young man and former schoolmate, named Beta, whose quiet seriousness might, as he hoped, steady his own course. But he was leaning on a broken reed, for Beta was himself a backslider. Again he was taken ill. God made him to "possess the iniquities of his youth." After some weeks he was better, and once more his conduct took on the semblance of improvement.

The true mainspring of all well-regulated lives was still lacking, and sin soon broke out in unholy indulgence. George Müller was an adept at the ingenuity of vice. What he had left he pawned to get money, and with Beta and two others went on a four days' pleasure-drive, and then planned a longer tour in the Alps. Barriers were in the way, for both money and passports were lacking; but fertility of invention swept all such barriers away. Forged letters, purporting to be from their parents, brought passports for the party, and books, put in pawn, secured money. Forty-three days were spent in travel, mostly afoot; and during this tour George Müller, holding, like Judas, the common purse, proved, like him, a thief, for he managed to make his companions pay one third of his own expenses.

The party were back in Halle before the end of September, and George Müller went home to spend the rest of his vacation. To account plausibly to his father for the use of his allowance a new chain of lies was readily devised. So soon and so easily were all his good resolves again broken.

When once more in Halle, he little knew that the time had come when he was to become a new man in Christ Jesus. He was to find God, and that discovery was to turn into a new channel the whole current of his life.

The sin and misery of these twenty years would not have been reluctantly chronicled but to make the more clear that his conversion was a supernatural work, inexplicable without God. There was certainly nothing in himself to "evolve" such a result, nor was there anything in his "environment." In that university town there were no natural forces that could bring about a revolution in character and conduct such as he experienced. Twelve hundred and sixty students there

gathered, and nine hundred of them were divinity students, yet even of the latter number, though all were permitted to preach, not one hundredth part, he says, actually "feared the Lord." Formalism displaced pure and undefiled religion, and with many of them immorality and infidelity were cloaked behind a profession of piety. Surely such a man, with such surroundings, could undergo no radical change of character and life without the intervention of some mighty power from without and from above! What this force was, and how it wrought upon him and in him, we are now to see.