



Sermon for St George's, 26th of September, 2021

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

⁶ But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, ⁷ even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. ⁸ Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, ⁹ but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. ¹⁰ Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The back-story to this week's hymn, begins in the grey, industrial town of Glasgow 1842. The wealthy and impoverished live side by side, depending on where on the ladder of Scotland's great weaving trade they stand.

It's also the year of George Matheson's birth – born the eldest of eight, to prosperous merchant George Matheson senior and his wife Jane...

Biographers mention early on though, the '*thorn in the flesh*' that was to beset George the younger – a disability that affected his sight, described by the doctors of the time, as an 'inflammation of the eyes'.

Through his childhood, we see this predicament scarcely hold him back, in fact, it's not too long before George's keen mind opens him up to some of the most prestigious schools resulting in his admission to the University of Glasgow at the age of just 15. To maximise what little sight George has, in these years he can be found wearing thick, powerful glasses, while sitting close to any window that will provide a steady supply of light. To be clear, George was never *completely* blind, but at its worst meant he could only make out shadows and outlines. Because of this, it's at around this time, that George also enlists help from his eldest sister, who even takes up Latin, Hebrew *and* Greek, in order to assist her brother. (And if you think that's a cake-walk, just ask Jeremy Wood what a tall order it would've been, to learn all three languages...)

Yet, in all his endeavours, George remains undaunted. Those who knew him tell us, that, **'In light of his ailment of poor sight, he had a reputation of being joyful, with a great spirit about him that was not easily discouraged'**. It seems George neither complains or bemoans his inability to see - even though we know he had every reason to do so. Even when it caused him such great heartache...

A heart-ache, that was just around the corner, for even while George flourishes academically graduating at just 19 with an honour's and then a Master's degree a year later, at a deeply personal level, he feels the full force of his visual impairment.

A burgeoning romance, between George and an undisclosed young lady, turns into the promise of engagement, when he finally plucks up the courage to ask her to marry him. Rumour has it though, things are short lived. George receives a note from his fiancée informing him that she could never agree to marry someone who would spend their life near-blind...

Who knows the wound that this causes George? The deep sense of powerlessness over losing out in love as a result of the one thing he could do nothing about - his sight, would've cut him deeply... But there was nothing to be done...

Picking up the pieces, instead he bravely throwing himself into preparation for pastoral ministry. After further theology study, and with the unstinting support of his eldest sister, he begins a short curacy which is quickly followed by thirteen years as lead minister at Innellan, a two hour's car-drive and short ferry trip west of Glasgow. To say, the Lord blessed his ministry is something of an understatement. At the height of it, Rev George Matheson preaches to 1,500 congregants every week... and people travel from all over Scotland to hear 'Matheson of Innellan'. As he preaches he bows his head at the pulpit, as if reading notes – while many of his audience remain unaware that he's near blind and has committed vast tracts of Scripture, along with his sermon, to memory.

So gifted is he at preaching, George is invited in 1885, by Queen Victoria herself to preach a sermon at Balmoral, a sermon he chooses, called, *'The Patience of Job'*. Queen Victoria finds it so compelling she calls for it to be published and its readership made widely available...

But again, ironically, it appears to have again come out of the deep soil of heartache and pain.

For just several year's before, in 1882, his eldest sister the one person who had been his constant companion and cared for this 'blind preacher', announces that she has fallen in love, and is to be married - leaving George once again deeply alone. The night of the wedding, when George's sister and family have gone to celebrate, he describes the circumstances that leads him to write the poetic verses of today's hymn, 'O Love that Wilt Not Let Me Go':

"It was the night of my sister's marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice rather than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction. I have no natural gift of rhythm. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high."

The four verses that flowed out like a dayspring, stand out as some of the most intimate words ever penned to any hymn.

O Love that will not let me go
I rest my weary soul in thee
I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be

After having been 'let go of' by his fiancée twenty year's prior, George faced that night the prospect of being 'let go' once again - this time, by his beloved elder sister who has been there, through all his ups and downs. In this darkest night of the soul, however, George comes face to face with the realization that 'Love', God's divine love - will not let [him] go...'

What reassurance that is for any of us who feel as if we have been 'let go of'... Faced by this steady gaze of 'Love', we hear George handing his 'weary soul to thee' - the Lord of Love Himself, which echoes for us Jesus' invitation found in Matthew 11:28, in the words of Eugene Petersen:

"28-30 "Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace."

As if handing over something that was really never George's to keep, in the last three lines, he finds that as he does so, Jesus' eternal promise that anyone who 'loses their life for my sake, will find it', is fulfilled in the oceans of God's depths:

*I give thee back the life I owe
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be*

Verse two, then goes onto pick up a similar theme, centring on what for George with his near-blindness, would be a highly significant image of who the Lord was to him, on that most difficult of nights:

*O Light that foll'west all my way
I yield my flick'ring torch to thee
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in Thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.*

Similarly, we see George being struck by the truth that God's light has always been present, following him, even though unseen, throughout his whole life's journey. Again, we get the picture of George 'yielding' and surrendering his vulnerable flame of faith and life to the wider, brilliance of God's inextinguishable light; thus reminding us that whatever frail light we may offer as followers, ours is merely a fraction of the magnificent light that we 'borrow' from and that emanates from God Himself. If you are feeling frail in your faith, let's be encouraged to open ourselves to the vast, limitless source of light that God offers us, as we face the challenge of being Christ's light in the world and the difficulty that this can present. Remember, we don't have to generate our own light, we just need to simply reflect His.

And then the most famous of the four verses, verse 3, we hear how George is being invited to contextualise his own suffering:

*O Joy, that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.*

Here we detect the relentless God of Joy, who comes after us – prodigal-like, even when we are going through the most excruciating pain... Not prepared to leave us there, here George concedes his need of what only the Lord can offer him – ‘I cannot close my heart to thee’... Instead, our hymnist finds himself being invited, Noah-like, to ‘trace’ the rainbow promise of God’s rescue for him and for each of us, as we all find ourselves locked down into this groaning, frustrated existence.

He writes, “I trace the rainbow through the rain/and feel the promise is not vain/That morn shall tearless be”. ‘Tracing the rainbow through the rain’ is the call that each of us is daily called to practice, as we recall the truth that God’s promises ultimately do not disappoint... That ‘morn’ that George writes of, is the fulfilment of a promise, found in Revelation 21, verses 3 and 4 when He shall make all things new:

“Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

Finally, in verse 4, George reminds us of how this promise of rescue ultimately comes about:

*O Cross that liftest up my head
I dare not ask to fly from thee
I lay in dust life’s glory dead
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be*

Here, George wonderfully portrays for us Jesus’ work on the Cross and his relationship to it. From his despair, we find George’s head being lifted from his situation to the centrepiece of his faith – ‘The Cross’, where he realizes where true hope is to be found. Rather than asking to ‘fly’ from the Cross, George lies down in the “dust life’s glory dead”, together with all his vain pursuits - and instead finds that in surrendering to Christ’s sacrificial death for him, surprisingly ‘blossoms red’, the hope of Resurrection here and now and in the age to come.

Are you feeling as if you are lying in the ‘dust of life’s glory dead’...? Feeling as if the bottom has dropped out of your life? Can I encourage you to become still and dare to see the ‘blossoms red’ emerging from where you thought no life

could grow... What are the glimpses of resurrection life in your circumstances now, but also eternally, that Jesus is gently calling you to notice...?

Allow yourself, your life, to be like that kernel of wheat that Jesus speaks of, in John 12, that unless it falls to the ground, to the dust even, and dies – ‘life’s glory dead’, it remains only a seed... How is Jesus inviting you to surrender to the dust, so that new life, and new fruit might be through Christ’s resurrection power being born in you anew?

Here in each verse, George affords us a picture of where he ultimately finds his comfort, in the face of immense suffering; the losing of his eldest sister to marriage, along with his own failed engagement. My question to you as you meditate on these words is, which of these lines or verses, most speak to you, as you walk your own journey of, yes, great strength but also decided difficulty?

While George never drew attention to his plight, later in life he reflected back on how this one physical weakness had shaped him:

He wrote that his was an “obstructed life, a circumscribed life...but a life of quenchless hopefulness, a life which has beaten persistently against the cage of circumstance, and which even at the time of abandon... has said not “Good night” but “Good morning”...

‘O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go’, set to the tune we know as St Margaret, by Scottish organist Albert Peace, is a personal and intimate hymn to the relentless love and hope we can find in God, despite our circumstances. May we find the comfort and reassurance in that, ‘Love that will not let us go’.

[Note: Hi Josh: There are two settings to this hymn that I think are deeply meditative and helpful, in this order. Would you be able to post the words and the music as we close out the sermon?]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Coxzkh3aXHg>

Dave Hunt – Ebenezer: A Collection

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJOUtCModPI>