

“Robert Murray McCheyne”

Born: 21 May 1813

Departed: 25 March 1843

By Willy Ng

Please turn your Bibles to **Philippians 3:17-4:1**,

“...**17** Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. **18** For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: **19** whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame - who set their mind on earthly things. **20** For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, **21** who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. **4:1** Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved...”

It is said that many years ago, a cynical lady in Alexandria, Egypt, was speaking out against the hypocrisy of Christians. But when asked if she had met no Christian whom she could regard as a genuine “man of God”, she replied,

“Yes, I saw one, a man, a pastor in this hotel, a tall spare man from Scotland. He was a man of God. I watched him, and felt that he was a genuine Christian. His very look did me good.”

This “man of God” is the subject of our talk this afternoon, namely, Robert Murray McCheyne. He is said to “*live Christ in a way that those who denied Christ could not fault.*”

Now, there is nothing new in what I am going to tell you about this “man of God”. This paper is actually a compilation of what many others have said or written about him. My duty this afternoon is merely to highlight to you some lessons we can learn from the life of this “man of God”.

His Birth

Robert Murray McCheyne was born on 21st May 1813 at No. 14 Dublin Street in the city of Edinburgh in Scotland. He was the youngest child of a family of five, consisting of 3 boys and 2 girls. His father Adam (1781-1854) was a prosperous lawyer but little is known of his mother Lockhart (1772-1854).

Now, it is important to see the “providence of God” in the choice of his birthplace, namely, the city of Edinburgh.

The **Westminster Shorter Catechism Q11** asks, *“What are God's works of providence?”* and answers, *“God's works of providence are, his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.”*

Surely we see the hand of God's providence even in the place of birth of McCheyne as in all things.

Since the rise of the great Scottish Protestant Reformer, John Knox, this city has been a place where the Reformed Faith was defined and declared with clarity and power. But by the time of McCheyne, the Church in Scotland was very much in the clutches and control of Liberalism.

Now, we learn that even in times of spiritual decline, God has never left Himself without a faithful witness and this was the case in the developing years of Robert McCheyne. God has people who remained faithful and useful in His service though they were in the minority. They continued to preach the gospel and maintain the work of Christ in the land of Scotland.

His Childhood

From his childhood days, we could see the hand of God in preparing McCheyne for his future calling. McCheyne displayed outstanding intellectual skills as a child. At the age of four, he taught himself to name and to write the Greek alphabet, while recovering from an illness. He later used a remarkable memory to memorize long passages of the Holy Scripture.

Brought up in the city of Edinburgh, Robert McCheyne distinguished himself at the Royal High School and entered Edinburgh University in November 1827 where he won many coveted prizes.

Robert McCheyne also enjoyed backpacking into the mountains around the city of Dunkeld in Scotland. These excursions were a preparation for his

famous hike around the land of Palestine years later in the work of the gospel. He also had a hobby that was again to be greatly used at a future date. It was the ability to sketch his surroundings or companions very quickly by pencil on paper.

Robert showed an early aptitude for the arts, especially music and poetry. He was keen on sports – particularly gymnastics. The latter hobby was one that he was to retain into his adult ministry and which resulted in at least one accident which may have been a contributing factor to his early death.

His Conversion

The religion of the family was fairly typical of the Edinburgh middle class at the time – respectable and moral with little evidence of true spiritual zeal and “enthusiasm”. It was his elder brother David who was the most earnest Christian in the family. It was the personal witness and godly example of David that caused McCheyne to seriously look at the necessity of conversion. He wrote, *“The Christian is a person who makes it easy for others to believe in God.”*

David was eight years his senior and was known for his integrity and sanctity. He felt in his soul the need to share Christ with his younger brother. This reminded us of another brother in **John 1:37-42**,

37 The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. **38** Then Jesus turned, and seeing them following, said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi" (which is to say, when translated, Teacher), "where are You staying?" **39** He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where He was staying, and remained with Him that day (now it was about the tenth hour). **40** One of the two who heard John speak, and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. **41** He first found his own brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which is translated, the Christ). **42** And he brought him to Jesus. Now when Jesus looked at him, He said, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (which is translated, A Stone)."

David died on the 8th of July 1831 at the young age of 26 years. His death was to have a profound effect on his younger brother, Robert McCheyne, who was only 18 years old at that time.

David's death left Robert with a great void in his young mind. He took the loss of David very hard. It had a very profound affect on his future spiritual direction. Robert regarded his own conversion as stemming from that day.

As we look at the early life of this "man of God", we find ourselves repeating the words of **Romans 8:28-30**,

"28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. **29** For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. **30** Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified..."

His Training for the Ministry

On 28th September 1831 Robert McCheyne presented himself to the Presbytery of Edinburgh and was accepted to study Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. It was here that he met his mentor, Dr. Thomas Chalmers, Professor of Divinity. Chalmers was to become his pattern for thought, life, and ministry. Surely this is an example of the instruction of **2 Timothy 2:2**,

"And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also."

From a letter he wrote to a fellow student, we see the rules of study McCheyne applied to himself:

"Do get on with your studies. Remember you are now forming the character of your future ministry, if God spare you. If you acquire slovenly or sleepy habits of study now, you will never get the better of it. Do everything in earnest. Above all, keep much in the presence of God. Never see the face of man till you have seen God's face who is our life, our all."

It was at this time that holiness of life which characterized his whole lifestyle began to emerge. This did not just consist of a series of prohibitions, but a very positive and wonderful experience of Christ in his life, which was to make his ministry effective far beyond his years.

He once wrote,

“Study universal holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this, for your sermons last but an hour or two: your life preaches all week. If Satan can only make a covetous pastor a lover of praise, of pleasure, of good eating, he has ruined your ministry. Give yourself to prayer, and get your Bible texts, your sermon thoughts, your words, from God.”

His Ministry

Even as a young man, McCheyne was mindful of the brevity of life. The last entry of his student days is “29 March 1835”.

He wrote,

“College finished on last Friday. My last appearance there. Life is vanishing fast, make haste for eternity.”

Under Chalmers’ influence McCheyne joined the Missionary Association and engaged in visitation of the poor in the needier Edinburgh districts. He developed an interest in overseas missions, meeting several times with Alexander Duff, the first Church of Scotland missionary.

He once wrote,

“I think I can say, I have never risen a morning without thinking how I could bring more souls to Christ.”

“A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more.”

After a short assistantship in Larbert near Falkirk, McCheyne was ordained the pastor of St Peter’s in Dundee in November 1836. St Peter’s was built as part of the Church of Scotland extension program initiated by Chalmers, and was situated in a rapidly expanding industrial area of Dundee. At one level McCheyne did not appear to be suited for such work. He was from a prosperous middle class background with little experience of the industrial working class; his health was not great, and in many ways he seemed more suited to a rural parish.

And yet in the providence of God, his training under Chalmers and his experience in Edinburgh and in Larbert had prepared him for his new charge.

McCheyne's ministry in St Peter's was innovative and radical. Starting with a clean slate he was able to build around himself a group of leaders and initiate new work which was largely unhindered by a more traditional perspective. He saw the prime need of the area as evangelism and he acted accordingly. He was concerned that the services should be as attractive as possible and did his utmost to ensure that the singing was melodious and enthusiastic. He started psalmody classes and sometimes even led the singing himself.

His preaching was simple. He sought deliberately to keep his speech plain and to use plenty of word pictures. Sermons varied in length from 20 minutes to one and a half hours. He preached with authority and had a great deal of application and winsomeness. McCheyne was keen on preaching from the Old Testament, especially the Song of Solomon, although the majority of his sermon series are from the New Testament.

He also engaged in a busy and strenuous program of pastoral and evangelistic visitation. Notes were kept of all his pastoral visits – with dates, descriptions and a record of the passage of Scripture read.

He wrote,

“A man who loves you the most is the man who tells you the most truth about yourself.”

Under McCheyne, St Peter's became an active Church with a large programme. As well as the usual Sunday services there was a Bible study on Thursday evening. This was a less formal meeting which was held in an often full Church (St Peter's was able to seat 1,100 people). Smaller classes were taught by both the elders and McCheyne throughout the week. A Church library was started to encourage reading and learning.

McCheyne's success is often attributed to his devotional life. He once wrote to a missionary candidate,

“Your own soul is your first and greatest care. Seek advance of personal holiness. It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to the Lord Jesus. A holy pastor is an awful weapon in the hand of God. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear, and

your heart full of God's Holy Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin."

"The greatest need of my people is my personal holiness."

He made prayer, meditation and self-discipline key aspects of his work throughout his life. His usual daily pattern was to rise at 6:30 am and spend two hours in private prayer and meditation (including an hour devoted to the Jews). From 8:30-10 am he had breakfast and family prayers. On Sundays his practice was to spend six hours in prayer and devotional reading.

He wrote,

"If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me."

McCheyne felt so strongly about private and family worship that he devised a yearly calendar for his people to enable them to read the Old Testament once and the New Testament and Psalms twice. We use this Bible Reading Schedule annually in our local church.

McCheyne had a particular missionary interest in the Jews. Consequently after the 1838 General Assembly decided to appoint a committee to examine the state of the Jews and what could be done, McCheyne was appointed as one of its members. It was decided to send a deputation to Israel to investigate the condition of the Jews there and throughout Europe. Dr Alexander Black (Professor of Divinity in Aberdeen), Dr Alexander Keith (minister of St Cyrus) and Andrew Bonar were McCheyne's companions. On March 27th 1839 they embarked on their journey. During the course of their six-month journey their letters home were published in the national and foreign press. The account of their journey, written by Bonar and McCheyne, was a best seller.

His Role in Revival

Whilst he was in Israel, the seed McCheyne had sown among his people came to fruition in a remarkable way. A great revival broke out in St Peter's under the ministry of William Chalmers Burns (who was only 24 years old). This revival was to continue through the remaining years of McCheyne's life. Truth pierced hearts in an amazing manner.

He wrote,

“Tears were streaming from the eyes of many convicted by the sermons, and some fell on the ground groaning, and weeping, and crying for God’s mercy.”

The whole town was moved by God’s Spirit. The fear of God fell upon the ungodly. Anxious multitudes filled the Reformed Churches.

This revival is different from what we are witnessing today in many churches. McCheyne refused to accept mere profession of faith as a sign of conversion. To him, a changed life was paramount. He wrote,

“It is holy-making gospel. Without holy fruit all evidences are vain....if you lack holiness, you will never see the Lord. A real desire after complete holiness is the truest mark of being born again. Christ is a holy Saviour. He first covers the soul with His white raiment, then He makes the soul glorious within and restores the lost image of God, and fills the soul with pure, heavenly holiness. Unregenerate men among you cannot bear this.”

“Most of God’s people are contented to be saved from the hell that is outside; they are not so anxious to be saved from the hell that is inside them.”

“Lord, make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.”

His Death

McCheyne was not a writer. His devotion was expressed in his fifty plus poems and hymns of which “*Jehovah Tsidkenu*” and “*I am a Debtor*” became the most famous. His only published book was a joint effort with Andrew Bonar entitled, “The Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews”.

In 1843 McCheyne was appointed to be a commissioner to the General Assembly which was to result in the Disruption and the establishment of the Free Church of Scotland. However in March he contracted typhoid fever whilst visiting in the Hawkhill area of his parish. After two weeks of illness and despite the Church being full every night of people praying, he died on 25 March 1843 at the young age of only 29 years old. Over six thousand people attended the funeral.

He was buried beside St Peter’s Church in Dundee, where an imposing tombstone marks his grave.

Immediately after McCheyne's death, Andrew Bonar, a close friend and colleague, wrote, "The Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne". This book, widely regarded as a devotional and spiritual classic, has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and is still in print and has resulted in McCheyne remaining a household name in Reformed circles throughout the world.

His monument contains the words,

"Who died...in the 30th year of his age and the 7th of his ministry. Walking closely with God, an example of the Christians in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. He ceased not day and night to labour and watch for souls, and was honoured by his Lord to draw many wanderers out of darkness into the path of life."

Although McCheyne was never married, he was engaged twice. At the time of his death in 1843, there is evidence that he was engaged to Miss Jessie Thain.

Robert Murray McCheyne followed the Lord Jesus Christ closely in his lifetime. His brief ministry of seven-and-a-half years left a great impression and impact on Scotland. His life undoubtedly exemplified the words he so often repeated, "*Live so as to be missed.*"

How about your life? How would you be remembered after your life on earth is completed?

May this life of Robert Murray McCheyne be an inspiration to you that you will strive to be a "*man of God*" and "*live Christ in a way that those who denied Christ could not fault*".

Oh, may you see the hand of God's providence in your own life and ministry even as you see in the life of Robert Murray McCheyne.

Amen.

Acknowledgement:

This message is based on the short autobiography found on the website of St Peter's Free Church, Dundee, Scotland. I have merely added some stories, quotations, applications and did some editing to it.