

The Christian Portrait Gallery

by Horatius Bonar

The sermon is a biographical sketch of Horatius Bonar, a Scottish poet and preacher who was a prominent figure in the Christian ministry and literature of his time.

Scripture: Matthew 5:16, Romans 10:15, 1 Corinthians 9:22, Philippians 2:15-16, Colossians 3:23-24, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, 2 Timothy 4:2, Hebrews 12:1-2, James 1:22, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Christian Leadership", "Legacy of Faith"

Description

Horatius Bonar reflects on the life and ministry of Christian leaders, emphasizing their dedication to God and the impact of their work on the community. He highlights his own journey from a passionate student to a revered minister, illustrating how his literary contributions and heartfelt preaching transformed lives. Bonar's commitment to spreading the Gospel and comforting the sorrowful is evident in his writings and hymns, which continue to inspire faith and hope. His legacy is marked by a deep love for Christ and a desire to share that love with others, making him a cherished figure in Scottish religious history.

Transcript

"The Christian" Portrait Gallery.

HORATIUS BONAR, D.D.

The Scottish Poet & Preacher; Author of "Hymns of Faith and Hope," &c., &c.

Taken complete and unedited from: "The Christian Portrait Gallery. Containing Over One Hundred Life-Like Illustrations: with Biographic Sketches." London: Morgan and Scott. Published undated. Circa 1890's.

BONAR is a loved and honoured name in Scotland. It has been borne by men who did much for religion by their life and teaching. Before 1688 John Bonar; Winister of Torphichen, was a torchbearer in dark days. His work was carried on by his descendants ; of whom the subject of this sketch is a living representative.

HORATIUS BONAR received his early education at the High School and University of Edinburgh. In youth he devoted himself to the service of God, and chose the Christian ministry to be his life-work. He was fortunate in having Dr. Chalmers for a teacher. The lessons taught him by that divine were doubly helpful they laid the foundation of the solid learning which has grown with growing years ; and they filled him with the enthusiasm of a master-mind consecrated to the highest aims. The value of such a, training can hardly

be over-estimated. It gave tone and strength to a life, when most susceptible of influence,

In 1837 the student became a minister. His sphere of labour was the famous old town of Kelso, situated on the banks of the Tweed, and surrounded by a country celebrated in song and tale. He gave himself up to his work with unflagging assiduity. In the pulpit he preached with fire and unction; and in house-to-house visitation he proved himself the comforter of the sorrowful and the guide of the perplexed. Varied and numerous as were the calls on his time, he managed to spare some hours to edit *The Presbyterian*, a magazine which did yeoman service for evangelical truth in its day. This was the literary apprenticeship of the skilled writer. He loved to handle the pen; but his chief joy lay in preaching.

The impulses he received from his teacher were deepened by his fellowship with the saintly McCheyne, of Dundee. A great revival had sprung up in that important town. The Spirit of God was poured forth; and many souls were saved. A tide of blessing swept through the land. Mr. Bonar entered heartily into the movement and helped to spread it. He spared not himself in his efforts to carry the Gospel to the perishing. At home, and from home, he spoke as a dying man to dying men. The result was--many conversions. This success did not satisfy him. He wished to do more. He thought his pen could reach those beyond his voice so he wrote "The Kelso Tracts." His aim was threefold--to warn the careless; to put salvation simply; and to edify saints. These messengers of life entered hundreds of homes, and were eagerly read. They struck with convincing power. Their circulation in Scotland and England was very large: and they met with a warm reception in America. Their work is not yet ended; for to this day they are blessed of God.

Mr. Bonar had then, as now, a special influence over the young. His winning manner and gentle tones caught their attention and his weighty words impressed their hearts. His Sabbath-school services in Kelso are still remembered with delight. He wrote for each service a hymn, which was sung by the boys and girls. These hymns have since found their way to most Sabbath-schools. Among them were such favourites as--

"I lay my sins on Jesus."

"I was a wandering sheep."

"A few more years shall roll."

After the singing came a short address, in which the love of Christ was told. These hours among the lambs of the flock were full of pleasure. They gave rest to the pastor, and were attended with the best results.

The "Disruption" came, and brought with it stirring changes. Some ministers were perplexed, but Mr. Bonar was not. He cast in his lot at once with the Free Church. He had not, like most of his brethren, to leave his church on leaving the denomination. It was secured to him and his congregation by some clauses in the title deeds. As the years rolled on it became increasingly the centre of light and usefulness. Its pulpit gave forth no uncertain sound, but declared fully the faith delivered to the saints. Its people were full of zeal and good works. Fired by their pastor's example, they followed him as he followed his Master.

But we have not so much to do with the pastoral as with the literary work of these years. The one was narrowed to a provincial town; but the other reached to every town in the land, and also to foreign countries, Mr. Bonar wrote much and well. His mind was stored with knowledge gained from many books; and his heart was on fire with love to Christ and souls; so his were winged words. His theological reading

was unusually wide for a busy minister. He was quite at home with the fathers; studied the literature of the Reformation carefully; and revelled in the Puritans. What he got, he could not keep to himself: he was but a steward, gathering to enrich others. His books were very popular. They were welcomed at many firesides, and read with profit. His "Night of Weeping" was a balm to bereaved hearts, comforting them in the presence of an open grave; and his "Morning of Joy" lifted the thoughts of the sorrowful to that land where suffering and death are unknown. Other volumes taught lessons in Christian experience, and unfolded the truths of the Kingdom.

The years of the Kelso ministry flowed smoothly. They had not in them much of external interest; but they were full of good work well done. In the pulpit, in the study, and at the fireside, the minister showed himself worthy of his high calling.

The round of parochial duties was broken in 1856 by a tour through the desert of Sinai and the Holy Land. The Strain of long labours had so crippled his strength that his sympathetic people gave him the rest he needed. He turned it to good account. On his return home, he wrote two books, "From Beersheba to Sidon" and "The Desert of Sinai," describing in graphic language what he had seen, and flinging the light of careful observation on Bible scenes. So the holiday served a double end; it supplied the weary worker with fresh vigour; and furnished many readers with a new picture of places very familiar, though never seen by them. Other services in the elucidation of Scripture followed. The most valuable of them was Light and Truth or, Bible Thoughts and Themes. It is a series of studies on texts in the Old and New Testaments, so arranged as to constitute a kind of continued

exposition, and abounding in passages which touch the heart and cling to the memory. In all he wrote, as in all he said, Dr. Bonar was consistent to his life-purpose--God's glory and the profit of souls. He did not seek earthly honour; but it came to him. His name grew to be a household word; and his writings won a high place in the devotional literature of our century.

As his reputation grew, efforts were made to lead him to a larger sphere. Such efforts were unsuccessful, till, in 1865, a handsome new church was built in that suburb of Edinburgh called "The Grange." He was asked to fill its pulpit and he consented. Like-minded men and women flocked round him and for over twenty years he ministered to them. Few visitors to Edinburgh have missed the opportunity of hearing him preach. They might go out of curiosity to see and listen to the sweet singer; but they were not long in the pew before they forgot the poet in the preacher. The opening prayer lifted them into the presence of God; and there they remained as the rich voice went on to speak of a love stronger than death, and of the deep experiences of Christian living. A Sabbath at "The Grange" is, as we have reason to know, a treasured memory to many tourists.

Dr. Bonar has now become too advanced in years for the heavy duties of his pastorate; so the Edinburgh Presbytery have given permission to the congregation to call a colleague.

The last days of an aged saint seem to us like a summer sunset; they are full of peace and beauty. The strong sun has run its course; and as it sinks to rest it bathes the landscape in a golden glow, which makes that which was already beautiful more beautiful still. So is it with Horatius Bonar. His long life has been spent in giving light; and its close is aglow with the beauty of saintliness. Men feel better because of such a history, and in presence of such a career.

Before we finish this fragmentary sketch, we must say something about Dr. Bonar's poetry though we do not need to say much; it is so well known. His "Hymns of Faith and Hope" are the fruit of thirty years'

thought and feeling. They appeared in various magazines, and were subsequently collected. Their title is very appropriate; for they sing of "faith" triumphant in difficulties, and of "hope" that never grows old. They are not sectarian, but seek to utter the experiences of all who serve the Lord Jesus Christ. They contain poetry of the highest order. Such gems as the following are to be found amongst them:

The star is not extinguished when it sets

Upon the dull horizon; it but goes

To shine in other skies, then re-appear

In ours, as fresh as when it first arose.

The river is not lost, when, o'er the rock

It pours its flood into the abyss below:

Its scattered force re-gathering from the shock,

It hastens onward, with yet fuller flow

The bright sun dies not, when the shadowing orb

Of the eclipsing moon obscures its ray;

It still is shining on, and soon to us

Will burst undimmed into the joy of day.

The lily dies not, when both flower and leaf

Fade, and are strewed upon the chill sad ground;

Gone down for shelter to its mother earth,

'Twill rise, re-bloom, and shed its fragrance round.

Thus nothing dies, or only dies to live;

Star, stream, sun, flower, the dew-drop, and the gold:

Each goodly thing, instinct with buoyant hope

Hastes to put on its purer, finer mould.

Thus in the quiet joy of kindly trust,

We bid each parting saint a brief farewell

Weeping, yet smiling, we commit their dust

To the safe keeping of the silent cell.

In his poetry, as in his prose, Dr. Bonar never forgets that his work in the world is to proclaim "Christ and Him crucified." The cross is for him the centre of the universe; and the atoning sacrifice of Calvary is his loved theme.

Thy works, not mine, O Christ,

Speak gladness to this heart

They tell me all is done;

They bid my fear depart.

To whom, save Thee,

Who can alone

For sin atone,

Lord, shall I flee?

The Doctor's poetry is rich and varied. He strikes many chords in the harp of music with a master-hand. Some further selections may show something of the power he has to sing to the weary, the sorrowful, and the struggling. The faith which turns earth into heaven and fills the heart with hope finds fitting expression in--

Life is coming, death is going.

Quickly past us time is flowing,

Amen, amen!

Day is dawning, night is flying,

Soon shall end this grief and sighing.

Amen, amen!

Rest is nearing, toil is ending,

Homeward now our path is bending.

Amen, amen!

Right is hasting, wrong is leaving,

Earth ere long shall cease its grieving.

Amen, amen!

Love is coming, hate is going,

Seeds of unity are sowing.

Amen, amen!

Fear is passing, hope is brightening,
Burdened brows and hearts are lightening.

Amen, amen!

Cells are bursting, chains are breaking,
Weary spirits cease their aching.

Amen, amen!

Tears are drying, songs are breaking,
Earth's glad echoes are awaking.

Amen, amen!

Graves are opening, dead are meeting,
Heaven and earth each other greeting.

Amen, amen!

Hill and vale put on their gladness,
Not a trace remains of sadness.

Amen, amen!

But sometimes the dark cloud of sorrow dims this hope : then the burdened soul finds relief in prayer.

When the weary, seeking rest,

To Thy goodness flee;

When the heavy-laden cast

All their load on Thee;

When the troubled, seeking peace,

On Thy name shall call;

When the sinner, seeking life,

At Thy feet shall fall,

Hear them in love, O Lord, the cry,

In heaven, Thy dwelling-place on high.

When creation, in her pangs,
Heaves her heavy groan;
When Thy Salem's exiled sons,
Breathe their bitter moan;
When Thy widowed, weeping Church,
Looking for a home,
Sendeth up her silent sigh,
"Come, Lord Jesus, come!"
Hear then in love, O Lord, the cry,
In heaven, Thy dwelling-place on high.

His strong faith in the near approach of the Second Advent colours much of Dr. Bonar's poetry. His hope is in the day of the Lord's appearing; he looks with eager longing for the dawning of the time when, as he has beautifully expressed it--

Heaven shall be on earth,
And earth shall all be heaven.

Quotations might be multiplied; but those given will have served their purpose if they lead the reader to go to the poems themselves. In them he will find a music to silence earth's discords, and a loving trust to throw a rainbow of hope over the sorrows of life.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/horatius-bonar/the-christian-portrait-gallery/>

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