

Augustus Toplady

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon highlights the efficacy of God's grace in the lives of His servants, particularly Toplady, who was a champion of the gospel against John Wesley's errors.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 2:8, 2 Timothy 4:7, Hebrews 13:7

Topics: "Sovereignty Of God", "Gospel Grace"

Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on the impact of God's grace through the lives and writings of eminent Gospel ambassadors from the last century, emphasizing how their testimonies continue to speak even beyond death. He specifically highlights the significant role of Augustus Toplady in standing against the errors of John Wesley and defending the sovereignty of God with great intellectual prowess and deep experiential knowledge of the truth. Philpot acknowledges Toplady's profound conversion experience and his unwavering commitment to preaching the gospel of grace, despite being part of the Church of England, alongside other notable ministers like Romaine and Hawker, who were mightily used by God within that context.

Transcript

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The God of all grace raised up, equipped, and sent forth many eminent ambassadors of the Gospel, in the middle of the last century, whose names are still embalmed in the hearts of his living family; for among the innumerable glories and excellencies of heavenly grace, this is not the least of its beauty and blessedness, that wherever vitally manifested, it lives and flourishes in death, through death, and beyond death. Like, indeed, its divine Author and sovereign Giver, its beauty and glory are hidden from the eyes of a profane and professing generation, that can no more love and admire grace than Herod and Pontius Pilate or the Scribes and Pharisees loved and admired Jesus Christ; but as in the days of his flesh, there were those favored ones who "beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth," so are there those now who still behold his glory, as made known to their souls in the grace of the gospel. All that savors of his power and presence, of his Spirit and love, is dear and estimable in their eyes. They love his servants, because, as anointed by his Spirit, they testify of Him; and they love what is uttered by their lips, or is traced by their pen, because, through their word and witness, heavenly blessings are communicated to their souls.

Nor does death break the bond of union which makes them and the church one in love. Their writings live when the hand that penned them is moldered to dust; the power and savor that rested upon them in life still anoints the records of their experience; and the same Jesus at the right hand of the Father now bears testimony to them, as they once bore testimony to him. Their persecutors have perished from the earth; their very names are forgotten, or, if remembered, are only so by virtue of their connection with the men whom they hated, as Alexander, the coppersmith, is preserved from oblivion by his persecution of Paul. So true is it, that "the name of the wicked shall rot," but "the righteous shall be in everlasting remembrance." And why? But because as the Lord said to his disciples, "It is not those who speak, but the Spirit of their Father which speaks in them;" and what he speaks is like him of whom he testifies, "the same yesterday, today, and forever." As, then, righteous Abel, by that faith of which he was made a partaker, "being dead yet speaks," so out of their tombs, or rather from their heavenly mansions, up to which faith follows them, do many departed servants of God still speak by their writings, or by such fragments of their living experience as are left on record. And in some sense they are more honored and esteemed now than when they lived and walked upon earth.

A great writer has said, "The evil that men do lives after them; the good is often interred with their bones." This witness is true as regards the children of men, whose evil is so great and good so little; but is not true as regards the servants of God. Their frailties and infirmities, however treasured up by a sneering world, are forgotten by the Church of God, and what they were by the grace of God is alone remembered. All in them that was mortal sank into the same grave with their tabernacles of clay, and what was immortal still survives untainted by death or corruption. So far as they were impregnated with life from the Fountain of Life, their words still live, and the same grace that breathed and spoke in them when their lips moved on earth, still speaks in their writings now that their souls have passed into glory.

But while we love the men, we do not idolize their names or canonize their writings. They are not Jesus, nor are their books the Bible. We love them because they loved Jesus, and we love their writings because they testify of him to us. What he made them they only then were, and what he makes them to us they only now are.

Among the eminent saints and servants of God, who lived in the last century, few have exercised a greater influence in the church of Christ than Toplady. He was raised up at a peculiar juncture, just when John Wesley was sowing his tares in the gospel field, and fighting with all the desperate enmity of his crafty mind against the sovereignty of God. Wesley was no common antagonist; and it needed a man of great natural powers of mind, acuteness, and force of intellect, undaunted fearlessness, readiness of pen, and above all, a deep experimental acquaintance with the truth, to meet and overthrow him in the field of conflict.

John Wesley had on his side nearly everything that could set off and recommend his flesh-pleasing doctrines. He had naturally great clearness of mind and precision of thought, and a very simple, lucid style of preaching and writing. These were backed by amazing zeal and earnestness, most unwearied labors, great self-denial, a look and manner almost apostolic, a large amount of outward holiness, and a singular power of influencing and governing the minds of men. In his preaching and writing there was so much scripture, torn and riven from its connection and plausibly introduced, as to gild over his errors; and, as he dwelt much upon the terrors of the law, and, to use the expression of his followers, "shook his hearers over hell," he alarmed the conscience of many with legal convictions, which he set himself to heal by preaching up fleshly holiness and perfection in the flesh. Against the sovereignty of grace, the glorious truths of personal election, particular redemption, imputed righteousness, a finished work, and the certain

perseverance of the saints of Christ, he fought with all the subtlety, ingenuity, and violence that could be displayed by the most daring rebel against God and godliness for more than sixty years, getting worse the older he grew. As the acknowledged leader of multitudes, he, by oceans of sermons, books, and tracts, filled hundreds and thousands of his followers with as much enmity as himself against the blessed plan of salvation by grace; and, determined to make a compact with error, and shore it up with all the beams and buttresses of human policy, he spared no labor, and shrank from no exertion to accomplish his end.

But just in the height of his war against the truths of the gospel, a champion stepped forth from the ranks of the despised Calvinists, who met him at the sword's point, beat his weapons out of his hand, and laid his pride and self-righteousness in the dust. This champion was the immortal Toplady.

A short sketch of this eminent saint and servant of God may, perhaps, be suitable. He was born at Farnham, Surrey, on the 4th of November, 1740, his father, who was a major in the army, dying at the siege of Carthage, soon after the birth of his son. He was partly educated at Westminster school, that celebrated seminary where so many great men, and among them, neither least nor last, the poet Cowper, have received that training which fitted them to occupy the most eminent positions in the State. But he was removed thence at an early period of his age by the circumstance of his widowed mother going to Ireland to obtain a family estate, so that he continued and finished his education at Trinity College, Dublin. It was there chiefly that, by dint of hard and unwearied study, he obtained that proficiency in the learned languages, and that great knowledge of divinity and church history which appear so conspicuous in his controversial writings. He certainly was possessed of very shining abilities, of great penetration and acuteness of mind, of a peculiar fluency of language, and at times of great elevation and even eloquence of expression. To these great natural abilities was added an unwearied perseverance, which made him study night and day.

All this he might have had independent of and distinct from divine grace, and have lived and died an enemy to God and godliness. But the Lord had designed him for great and eminent services in his vineyard, and therefore, in his own time and way, called him by his grace. We do not know the exact means the Lord employed to awaken him from his sleep of death, but his mother was a gracious woman, and he sat under the sound of the gospel before he went to Ireland. He has himself told us that "he was awakened in August, 1756," but we know not how deeply he suffered under the condemnation of a broken law and the guilty alarms of a conscience made tender in the fear of God. The time and manner of his deliverance is much better known, and was very marked and conspicuous. About a year after his first awakening, when but sixteen years of age, he one evening went into a barn at a place called Codymain, in Ireland, where a man named Morris was preaching to a handful of people. There the Lord blessed and delivered his soul from the bondage and curse of the law, and brought him near unto himself by the blood of sprinkling. He thus speaks in his diary of that memorable evening:

Feb. 29th, 1768.--At night, after my return from Exeter, my desires were strongly drawn up to God. I could indeed say that I groaned with groans of love, joy, and peace; but it was even with comfortable groans which cannot be uttered. That sweet text, Eph. 2:3: "You who were once afar off, are made near by the blood of Christ," was particularly delightful and refreshing to my soul; and the more so as it reminded me of the days and months that are past, even the days of my sensible espousals to the bridegroom of the elect. It was from that passage that Mr. Morris preached on the memorable evening of my effectual call by the grace of God. Under the ministry of that dear messenger, and by that sermon, I was, I trust, brought near by the blood of Christ, in August, 1756.

But though thus sensibly brought near by the blood of the Lamb, much darkness rested on his mind respecting those heavenly truths, which are usually called the doctrines of grace. For about two years was he searching and inquiring into the truth, until the reading of Dr. Manton's sermons on John 17 was blessed to his soul to lead him into, and establish him upon the grand discriminating truths of sovereign grace. About four years after this establishment of his soul in the truth of God, and six years from the time of his deliverance in the barn, he was ordained a minister of the Church of England.

Though unable ourselves to continue in that system, we are not so bigoted as to deny that the Lord has had dear saints and eminent servants of his, who lived and died in communion with it. Romaine, Berridge, Toplady, and Hawker, where can we find four men or ministers more blessed of God in their own souls, or in their ministry to others? In the Church of England they were born and brought up; in it they preached and labored, and God owned and blessed their labors; and in it they died in peace and joy, and the full assurance of faith.

The objections, the well-grounded objections which have compelled so many good men to leave her walls, were not laid upon their consciences. The providence of God seemed to favor their continuance where they were; and as the Lord overruled this circumstance to the effectual calling and blessing of many under their ministry, what can we say? Who that fears God and loves his truth would have lifted up his finger to prevent Romaine preaching at St. Dunstan's, Fleet Street, or St. Anne's, Blackfriars, to crowds of listening hearers? Who would not be glad were there such a preacher in London now, whether he preached in Westminster Abbey or St. Pancras Church? Who that loves the truth would wish to nail the pulpit door against Dr. Hawker, as he walked up the aisle of Charles Church, Plymouth? Had these great and good men felt as Mr. Brook and Mr. Birch felt, they would have acted as Mr. Brook and Mr. Birch acted, and cast gown and cassock, prayer-book and surplice to the moles and the bats.

But the errors and corruptions of the Church of England which have forced so many good men out of her pale, were not laid with weight and power on their conscience. They saw that she held truth, blessed truth, for the most part in her articles, and there being an open door in her communion to preach the gospel without hindrance, and being much blessed in their own souls, and in the ministry, they continued to preach peace by Jesus Christ without being disturbed in their consciences by what has been an intolerable burden to other men of perhaps less grace than themselves, but more exercised on these particular grounds.

But evil always produces evil, and the consequence of these good men remaining in and sanctioning by their example a corrupt system, has been to embolden others who have neither their grace nor their gifts to stand out against all convictions themselves and to condemn those who desire to act in the fear of God in this important matter.

Toplady evidently was greatly blessed in his own soul both in private and in public, when a minister at Fen Ottery, and Harpford, Somerset, and afterwards at Broad Hembury, Devon. No one who knows and loves the truth can read his diary, never meant to be perused by mortal eye, without seeing how, at times, his soul was blessed and favored.

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