

George Isbell

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon discusses the importance of preserving the memory of a servant of God through their writings, and the qualities that make a great writer.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 18:18

Topics: "Ministerial Legacy", "Christian Character"

Description

J.C. Philpot reflects on the enduring memorials of a servant of God, emphasizing that the most lasting legacy is found in the works of a minister, whether through the lives touched by their preaching or the written words that continue to impact generations. Philpot discusses the importance of combining genius with grace in writings to ensure lasting impact, citing Bunyan's 'Pilgrim's Progress' and Hart's Hymns as examples. He also delves into the sensitive yet affectionate nature of George Isbell, a beloved minister, highlighting the challenges of sensitivity in ministry and the balance needed between sensitivity, affection, and firmness. Philpot concludes by praising Isbell's letters as a heartfelt expression of personal experiences and struggles in faith, showcasing the power of private correspondence in revealing the depths of one's heart.

Transcript

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When one whom we have loved and esteemed passes away from this mortal scene, and leaves behind him that fragrant recollection which grace alone diffuses over those who manifestly live and die in the Lord, a desire, partly perhaps natural, but partly also spiritual, springs up in the bosom that some enduring monument should be reared as a tribute of affection and respect to his memory. To this feeling we may, perhaps, ascribe many, if not most, of those Obituaries which some of our readers consider the most profitable and interesting part of our pages; for though we would willingly attribute to those who send them the higher motives of seeking thereby the glory of God and the good of his people, yet no doubt, in very many cases, there intermingle with these holier and loftier aims promptings of natural love and affection to raise some abiding memorial to the departed.

But when the deceased object of this esteem and affection has occupied a public position; when to the claims of private and personal love and esteem there are added those peculiar ties which bind a minister

to a people in particular, or, if his labors have been more widely diffused to the church of Christ in general, then there seems to be a more widely-spread desire that some means should be adopted to preserve his name in enduring remembrance.

Now there is no such enduring memorial of a servant of God as his works, whether we understand by that term those living souls that were begotten under his word to life eternal, or, if a writer, the living productions of his pen. Other memorials soon pass away, for the seeds of mortality are naturally in them; no, time gradually removes from earth the living witnesses of the most powerful ministry. How few, for instance, now remain of Mr. Huntington's attached friends and hearers; and his sons in the faith, Beeman, Turner, Vinall, and Chamberlain have followed their father to the mansions above. If affection raises a tomb over the spot where the remains of the deceased repose until the resurrection morn, stone gradually moulders and decays; and the deepest-cut inscription sooner or later fades and becomes indistinct under the corroding effects of wintry storm and summer sun. Besides which, the richest tomb which affection can rear over the grave of the departed is but local, bounded by the walls of a cemetery; and the carefully penned inscription is often only read by the idle eyes of a few summer strollers, or listlessly spelt out, letter by letter, by wandering nursemaids to their little troop.

Even the very chapel where the well-known voice once sounded forth the gospel of the grace of God can give no guarantee of permanency to the tablet which records the memory of the departed servant of Christ. What has become, for instance, of that rich marble tablet which the respect and affection of a bereaved church and congregation raised to the memory of the immortal Coalheaver, in Providence Chapel, bearing that renowned inscription which he dictated just before his decease? In a few years it was torn down, as desecrating the place which a bishop had consecrated for another church, another service, another congregation, and another gospel. But Mr. Huntington's writings had already reared a memorial to his name which will last when St. Bartholomew's, as we believe it is now called, shall have been swept away by the all innovating rail, or become re-consecrated and re-christened for the celebration of high mass and the gorgeous ceremonial of Popish worship. If there were no other memorial of Mr. Huntington than the few aged members of his church and congregation who are waiting their dismissal, or his monument at Lewes, now that his London tablet is gone, his name would soon live only by tradition. But, with a better intent and with a holier purpose, he had, like Absalom, in his lifetime reared up for himself a pillar in the king's dale, (2 Sam. 18:18) in those productions of his pen which will last, if not as long as the English language, at least as long as truth, in its experience and power, shall be prized by English saints.

It is hard, if not wrong, to put asunder what God has joined together, but we have often felt that separate from the grace and wisdom, truth and power which shine so eminently forth in "The Kingdom of Heaven taken by Prayer," and the "Contemplations of the God of Israel," merely viewed as literary productions, they claim, from their eloquence, their vigor and variety of expression, their originality, and their constant flow of thought, a high place among our English classics. The wonder to us is, where the poor coalheaver, amid all the poverty and rags of childhood, youth, and manhood, picked up his vocabulary--the tools of his tool chest, with which, in after years, he constructed his immortal works. But his was a master mind, and when released from manual toil he cultivated it by deep and assiduous study, his powerful and tenacious memory storing up for ready use every word that met his eye or ear.

We do not expect to carry with us the assent of all our readers when we express our decided opinion that whatever writings are given to the public, either by an author himself during his lifetime, or by his friends and relatives after his decease, something more than grace is needed to give them permanent endurance. To make them the handbook of successive generations, genius must be combined with grace--the

mastermind and the vigorous pen with the anointing which is from above.

For proof take two well-known books, which will live until the angel which shall stand upon the sea and the earth shall lift up his hand to heaven and swear, "There shall be time no longer,"--we mean, Bunyan's "Pilgrim" and Hart's Hymns. Do not think, gracious reader, that the only difference between you and these men of God is that they had more grace and experience than you. Do you suppose that if you had Bunyan's experience, you could sit down and write a "Pilgrim's Progress;" or if you had had such a view of the sufferings of Christ as Hart was favored with, you could compose a Gethsemane hymn? It was not grace only, or the depth and variety of his experience, which drew the immortal pictures that have made the "Pilgrim" a household word. Without grace, there would have been no "Slough of Despond," or "Castle of Giant Despair;" no "roll in the bosom," or view from "the Delectable Mountains." But genius was needed for the graphic descriptions, the life-like touches, the sharp-cut characters, the varied dialogue, the constant succession of picturesque incidents which delight all ages and all readers.

So with Hart's Hymns. It is not merely the richness and savor, depth and variety of experience, nor even the wondrous dew and savor so copiously shed upon them by the Holy Spirit, that we have sometimes felt and said that they were written under his special inspiration, which have given his hymns such a place in the church of God. Mr. Hart was a great poet, as well as a great Christian; not, indeed, in the same sense that Milton is a great poet, as full of beautiful imagery and sublime expression. Hart rarely allows himself the use of poetic language; but he was gifted with a style unrivaled for power and what is called terseness of expression; that is, the packing of the greatest amount of ideas into the smallest amount of words, which critics consider one of the rarest and most valuable features of authorship.

You and we, dear readers, in our talk, in our letters, in our prayers, and in our preachings, and you will add, "Yes, and you in your Reviews," are like cotton-spinners; one pound of raw cotton goes a long way in thread. But there is no thread-spinning in Hart's hymns. Every word counts. Treasures are in a line; and like the Bank of England ingots, they are all so closely packed that you can scarcely find in them a useless or superfluous word. This is what we call genius. You will, perhaps, prefer to call it "gift." We shall not differ here, for it was a special gift. But you who think that you, too, possess a special gift for writing poetry, and especially hymns, just try whether you can put your experience into Hart's rhymes, or condense it into Hart's lines. Why, you can no more do it than you can give yourself Hart's revelation of Christ, or Hart's view of Christ's sufferings in the garden of Gethsemane.

But we have wandered from our subject, which was to pen a few lines on a more simple and, doubtless, less enduring memorial than the immortal works of the three great English worthies fit to rank among the three mighty men who stood first and foremost of David's thirty captains--Bunyan, Hart, and Huntington. The little work before us does not assume such a position, or take so high a flight. It is simply intended as a slight memorial raised by the hands of a widow, at the solicitation of many friends, who wished some tribute of affection to be rendered to their esteemed and beloved minister. When we add that this widow is a sister in nature as well as a sister in grace, it will be sufficiently obvious that we feel some difficulty and delicacy in reviewing the book. And yet it is but due to her and due to ourselves to declare, that we had no hand whatever in suggesting its publication, in collecting or revising the letters for the press, and that no wish has been expressed for us to take any public notice of it. On these grounds, therefore, we feel as free to express our opinion of these letters as if their writer were not a brother-in-law in nature as well as a friend and brother in grace. And yet our personal knowledge of the writer puts us in a position to make a few friendly remarks upon him, as a little introduction to the letters now given to the public.

Mr. Isbell, both as a man and as a minister, was much beloved by his friends and those to whom his ministry had been blessed. He was naturally of a highly sensitive disposition; and if this made him acutely feel neglect and unkindness, it was compensated by a proportionate warmth of affection when it met with a suitable return from friends. It was this kindness, this amiability, this willingness to oblige which endeared him to his friends more than falls to the lot of many ministers. And yet this sensitive, affectionate disposition, which we cannot but admire, had, in his case, as in others similarly gifted, attendant inconveniences.

A minister should not be too sensitive. If he is to feel every slight, and be deeply wounded by every arrow, directly or indirectly aimed at him, he is on the continual fret. His friends dare hardly speak lest they should hurt his mind, and his enemies are glad that he has a mind which they can so easily hurt; and thus friendships are cooled or lost, and enmities made irreconcilable. We have often thought that if we were as sensitive as our departed friend Isbell was, and felt as acutely as he did the scourge of the tongue and pen, we must have sunk long ago under the missiles thrown at us from every side. Whether our skin be naturally more tough, or has become hardened by war, we will not say; but this we know, that if our mind were as tender as our body, and we felt the cold blasts from the mouth of man as we feel the cold blasts from the mouth of the wintry east wind, we would not be fit to hold the helm, or even stand on the deck of the ship which we are now steering through the eddy waves.

It was not that he was deficient in faithfulness, for he was a remarkably bold speaker, and never truckled to any man, in public or in private. Nor did he show his feelings by warmth of temper; but an unkind word from a friend, which some would no more regard than a passing breath of wind, wounded him to the quick. We may often admire what we do not envy. Warm, sensitive, acute feelings are very beautiful, but not very desirable. A word, a look, some unintentional neglect, an unanswered letter, a hasty remark, a tart reply, so wounds your sensitive friend, as he so broods over it, that, perhaps, it costs you his friendship for life. And as this sensitiveness often costs him his friends, so it lays him open to the attack of enemies. We speak thus, not to disparage the dead, but as a word of counsel to the living. Brother ministers, we have all much to bear with from friends and foes. Our blessed Lord had to endure the contradiction of sinners against himself, and was forsaken by his disciples and friends. But he has left us an example how to act that we should walk in his steps. If, then, one who has had to bear much from friend and foe may give you counsel, he would say, "Be not too sensitive. Be firm, be faithful; but bear with your friends, and bear from your enemies. We have found the benefit of both."

But if our friend and brother Isbell was too sensitive, it was well balanced in his case by affection; and there was this advantage, that while he chiefly suffered from the one, his friends benefited by the other. He had also a very forgiving spirit, and was thus, if soon offended, easily conciliated; nor could he do enough for his friends, and especially those of them to whom his ministry had been blessed, and who for the most part were as much attached to him as he to them. Our dispositions are often well balanced and mutually corrected. Sensitiveness without affection makes a man a selfish wretch; balanced and corrected by affection, it gives warmth to friendship, though it will sometimes turn it into partiality. On every side are extremes, snares, and dangers. Sensitiveness without taking offence, affection without partiality, boldness without bitterness, gentleness without giving way, cautiousness without cowardice, faithfulness without fury, and contention for the faith without compromise of the spirit of the gospel--how desirable, yet how rare are such qualifications for a servant of Christ.

But, as we are sketching his character, we may add that, together with this naturally sensitive yet affectionate disposition, Mr. Isbell possessed considerable natural abilities. His was not indeed a deep, but

a singularly active, ready mind, and one which he had much cultivated by patient and assiduous study. He had also a peculiar aptness of eye and hand, and a turn for scientific pursuits, which, as we do not wish to disguise his failings, proved, we think, in the end rather a snare, and not only injured body and mind, but weakened the force of his ministry. We all have our snares--none more than the writer of this Review; but he knows, from painful experience, that it is as sad to be caught in them as hard to avoid them. That their profiting may appear to all, ministers must give themselves wholly to their work. (1 Tim. 4:15.) Every pursuit, therefore, however useful for other men as a part of their business or profession, which is not of the things of God, hinders the real and visible profit of a servant of Christ.

He perhaps, for we wish to speak tenderly as well as truthfully, from constitutional irritability of nerve, needed more recreation and relaxation of body and mind than harder, stronger natures, and sought to find it, not in fresh air and exercise, which we have always found to be the best remedy for a wearied brain and nerves unstrung, but in almost continual reading and study. But a good long walk or a dig in the garden would, we think, have been a better remedy for his languid nerves; for the cure eventually proved worse than the disease, and taxed his brain instead of relieving it.

Thus worn out by a sensitive mind, an overtaxed brain, ministerial labor, and mental anxiety, joined to a constitutionally weak bodily frame, he fell asleep at the early age of 45, as his mourning widow has recorded in the interesting little memoir prefixed to the Letters which she has published.

And now a few words about the Letters themselves which are thus given to the public. Though, from our personal knowledge of the writer, we were prepared to give them a favorable reception, yet we must say that they have exceeded our expectation. Knowing his abilities, and that he was a very good letter-writer as well as one who well knew and loved the truth, we quite expected that they would outshine the general run of religious correspondence; but we did not look for so much of the writer's own experience. Not that we doubted his possession of it or his ability to express it; but we knew that from his peculiar sensitiveness, and we might almost say shyness of mind, for they usually go together, he was accustomed to keep back both in public and private much of his own personal feelings. But, these letters appear to have broken the seal that was often on his lips. In this point, therefore, they have exceeded our expectation; and yet we need not wonder at it as an unusual feature.

Letters, especially when written to beloved friends in the Lord, draw forth much of the inmost experience of the writer's heart. The very freeness of correspondence unlocks those bosom secrets which are often almost necessarily held back from a public congregation. You know that your friend will not abuse your confidence, betray your secrets, or make you an offender for a word. As you write, your friend comes before your mental eye, affection softens your heart towards him, the springs of inward feeling gradually rise, and they flow forth, according to the gift bestowed, in streams upon your paper. It is this freedom of communication and this writing out of the fullness of the heart which give letters by the saints and servants of God such a peculiar sweetness and power. Not being intended for the public eye, they are specially adapted for private reading. We can take the book up or lay it down, read a long letter or a short one, without straining the mind or distracting the attention. If it suits us, we go reading on, letter after letter, as we have often done with Mr. Huntington's Letters. If it does not suit heart, time, or place, we can but lay the book down. It is a patient visitor, not jealous of a rival or sensitive of neglect, but bearing any amount of rebuff, coldness, or silence, and ready to speak again only when asked to do so.

The letters before us are written in a pleasing, easy, agreeable style, full of kindness and affection, for such was the man, and unfold much of his own exercised mind. Judgment, we think, has been shown in

the selection of the Letters; and we are glad to see the early ones given as well as the later, as, in our opinion, there is in them more vigor and force, more freshness and originality, boldness and decision. It is the case mostly with us all. With advancing years we get, perhaps, a sounder, riper judgment in the things of God, more maturity of views, and greater firmness and solidity of experience; but the life and warmth, the fire and force of what Job calls "the days of our youth" (29:4) are usually much diminished; and of few of us, beyond middle age, can it be said, either naturally or spiritually, as of Moses, that "our eye is not dim, nor our natural force abated."

When a writer at a certain period of life (we speak here from experience) looks over his early productions, he sees in them many hasty expressions which he would not now make use of, and which he may sigh over, as scarcely becoming the meekness and spirit of the gospel. But if he has a sigh for undue expressions, he has a still heavier, more deep and long-drawn sigh for the loss of that zeal, warmth, and animation which then glowed in his bosom and fired his voice and pen, but which he can no more recall than he can give himself back the strong arm and elastic step of early manhood. But every age has its place in the church of God. Babes, children, young men, and fathers, all are necessary to the being and riper knowledge of him that is from the beginning, the young men are more strong, and the word of God abides in them, and they more stoutly fight, and more manifestly overcome the wicked one. O that we had more of these young men; that as the fathers are taken home or laid aside by sickness and infirmity, we could see rising up men of might and men of war, fit for the battle, that can handle shield and shield, whose faces should be like the faces of lions, (against error and evil,) and as swift as the roes upon the mountains, to run upon the Lord's errands. (1 Chron. 12:8.)

But as our readers will desire to form their own judgment upon the Letters before us, we will give them one, as a specimen of their general character.

"My dear Friends--Accept my thanks for your affectionate letter. I quite agree with you, that there may be a resisting the call of a church of God to the oversight of them; but I do not consider this to be at all applicable to me, as I am simply waiting the Lord's time, and am willing to go or stay, just as he shall make known his will. If I could find one or two supplies for the people here during my absence, I should have my path made considerably plainer; and, I can assure you, that there is no church to which my poor services would more freely be given than to that at Leicester; for I cannot doubt that the Lord of the harvest has condescended to work by me when with you, and has not let the word return to him void. I confess, however, that the sense of my insufficiency is no small mountain in my way, and that I am exercised with fears on this account, which greatly impede me. The Lord alone can make our mountains become a plain, and exactly level the rough and crooked path by an assurance that 'as our day our strength shall be, while our shoes shall be iron and brass,' to enable us to pass through the thorns and briars, and to tread upon thorns and scorpions unharmed. I feel that I could go anywhere, if God's presence would go with me. This is all and in all to a weak and ignorant stumbler such as I am. He knows my frame, and remembers that I am dust. Poor and helpless, needy and sinful, I have none but Jesus to look to, and can see none that can strengthen my weak hands, confirm my feeble knees, direct my tottering feet, and bless my fainting heart but he. 'To whom shall we go?' said Peter. 'You have the words of eternal life.' And to whom do we desire to go but to him, when feeling that all our springs are in him?

O that I could love and serve him better, and not to be such a base and wandering wretch, as I am constrained to confess to him that I am. He has, before now, filled my heart, and I have seen myself 'complete in him.' Unexpectedly, suddenly, has my soul beheld his beauty and glory, and I have felt solemnly and sweetly satisfied that he is my portion forever, a portion inexhaustible and precious. But,

alas! how little do I appear to profit by this, when I wander from him and grow cold and vain. Truly, my dear friends, I know, that unless he displays his charms in our hearts, by the blessed Spirit, and draw our affections after him, we cannot praise him in sincerity, cleave to him with love, fear to offend him, and wait upon him to teach us to profit, and to lead us in the way we should go. To be made conscious of our utter emptiness, poverty, and corruption, as I am, is painful and trying; for sometimes I can see no 'good thing towards the Lord God of Israel' in my soul, but so many bad things against him, that I am obliged to say, 'Behold, I am vile!' and to put my mouth in the dust, if so be there may be hope.

He may well be called 'wonderful' who bears with such a base thing, and such base workings as are in me; and he must be felt to be 'wonderful,' whose mercy, notwithstanding, endures forever. It is a sad proof of our fallen state, and of the depravity of our nature, that we are so little affected by his goodness, and so ready to depart from him, 'forsaking the fountain of living waters, and hewing out for ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.' Who would be so happy as we, if we could be always drinking deep into his love and grace, and having our hearts melted at the fire of his dying love, with sin subdued, and Satan bruised under our feet? But, 'in the world,' Jesus declares, 'you shall have tribulation,' and from this we cannot escape, if we are truly his disciples. Nor do we desire to escape and be at ease in the flesh when our minds are enlightened from above, for then we see the need of tribulation and trials.

'I must expect a daily cross;

Lord, sanctify my pain;

Bid every furnace purge my dross,

And yield some real gain.'

I have far more trial to endure than many suppose, not only within, but from without. 'The heart knows his own bitterness, and a stranger does not intermeddle with his joy.' Sometimes my burdens have been so many, and my heart so unbelieving and faint, that I have been bewildered, and 'ready to halt,' and have been cast down indeed; and yet I hope I may say, without any presumption, 'Lord, you have been my help,' you have made a way for me to escape, you have not given me over to the will of my enemies, nor have 'broken the bruised reed, nor quenched the smoking flax.' In my troubles I have found little disposition to make them known to man, but have kept them secret in my own bosom, and have carried them where I know help only to be laid up for the poor and needy. Here I have, I trust, found a Friend; here I have been able to lay hold of better strength than that of man; and never, when I have been permitted to roll my way simply, sincerely, and confidingly upon the Lord, have I been forsaken or failed of help. I can look back to seasons when I felt sure the Lord had heard and answered my petitions, and it has been marvelous in my eyes. But I shall appear egotistical, if I write so much about myself. My friends must forgive me if I weary them. I am often a 'burden to myself;' but I would not burden my indulgent correspondents. I hope you are helped still to seek the Lord on my behalf, to give me life, light, wisdom, grace, humility, and clear direction in my way. Both will and power do I need to do anything that is good."

--August, 1847. George Isbell

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