

Chapman , Robert Cleaver Bio

by John Bjorlie

Robert Cleaver Chapman was a Christian minister who lived out his faith with integrity, prioritized living out his faith over preaching and teaching, and had a significant impact on others through his missionary zeal and spiritual elevation.

Scripture: Genesis 12:2, Matthew 22:39, Acts 20:35, 1 Corinthians 6:1, 1 Corinthians 13:4, Ephesians 4:2, Philippians 2:3, Colossians 3:12, 1 Timothy 3:3, Hebrews 13:16

Topics: "Christian Discipleship", "Faith Conversion"

Description

John Bjorlie preaches about the remarkable life of Robert Cleaver Chapman, a man known for his wisdom, compassion, and unwavering faith in God. Despite being born into wealth and having a promising legal career, Robert's encounter with the grace of God led to a dramatic conversion that changed the course of his life. He dedicated himself to serving God wholeheartedly, living a life of humility, prayer, and selflessness, impacting many lives through his hospitality, love, and commitment to the gospel. Robert's missionary zeal, sacrificial lifestyle, and deep love for God and others serve as an inspiring example of true Christian discipleship.

Transcript

The letter, sent from abroad, was simply addressed to:

R. C. Chapman

University of Love

England

Robert Cleaver Chapman (1803-1902) was so renowned for his wisdom and compassion, that the postal service knew where to deliver that letter.

Robert was born into a wealthy English family. His mother tutored him at home until he was about nine. As a child he showed aptitude for language study. At age fifteen, Robert was sent to school in Yorkshire. Henry Pickering says he "studied law and became a solicitor. In this profession he soon occupied a good position, and had he pursued the course on which he started there is little question that the high honors to which it can lead might have been his. But God had honor in store for him, great and abiding, such as the world cannot give."

The pivot in Robert's story came when he was twenty. Elderly John Whitmore invited him to hear James Harington Evans. There his eyes saw the true grace of God and he was saved. Robert's experience shows that you need not have been a profligate vagrant in order to have a dramatic conversion experience. Despite Robert's outwardly blameless conduct, the change was startling. Soon he learned from the Bible that believers should be baptized. When he told brother Evans so, the cautious preacher said, "You will wait a while, and consider the matter."

"No," said Chapman, "I will make haste, and delay not, to keep His commandments." This eagerness to obey his God marked his long Christian career.

In April, 1832, when he was 29, Chapman left the legal profession (he had been an attorney of the Court of Common Pleas and at the Court of the King's Bench) and went to minister the Word in a Baptist congregation at Ebenezer Chapel in Barnstaple, County of Devon, England. He had been unhappy with compromises he felt he had been party to in the legal profession. In one case, he discovered that both the plaintiff and the defendant were believers, which, of course, is an obvious violation of 1 Corinthians 6:1. When Robert announced that he felt God had called him to take the message of salvation to the poor, friends said, "Robert will never make a preacher."

He answered, "There are many who preach, but not so many who live Christ. My aim shall be to live Christ."

So Robert stepped down the social ladder to labor in lower class Barnstaple. He would say, "We shall not escape the tongues of others, unless we first escape from self-love and self-flattery." One of the luxuries Robert left was his chauffeur-driven coach. Giving up these status symbols, he said, "My pride never got over it." Thereafter, his mode of travel to his daily preaching appointments was his shoe leather, regularly walking 20 miles in a day. Once in a letter he wrote, "I was obliged to use conveyances; but, oh! how much rather do I choose to travel on foot for the work of the Lord, and communion with Him!"

This move was in 1832, the same year that George Mueller and Henry Craik began to labor in Bristol. These servants of Christ would have a strong influence on the believers in Barnstaple and vice versa. Their close friendship would span 68 years. Chapman also came into contact with John Nelson Darby about this time.

The words "given to hospitality" could have been written over the entrances at Numbers 6 and 9, on the short street called New Buildings. Number 6 was Chapman's dwelling, a simple apartment "where any Christian, even the poorest, could come without hesitation." Chapman's open house was a rendezvous for workers from abroad. He greeted visitors with a warm, "Dear brother, if you come by invitation, you are welcome; if you come without invitation, you are doubly welcome." Battle-worn evangelists like Anthony Norris Groves, George Brealey, David Rea, Alexander Marshall, and John Knox McEwen would resort there for counsel and rest.

The book, *The Growth of a Work of God*, tells about Hudson Taylor's private interviews "with the saintly Robert Chapman." "Saturday was the day Mr. Robert Chapman set apart for special waiting upon God, though it was his habit to rise always at or before daylight and give hours to fervent intercession--and this until he was well over ninety years of age. His 'workshop' claimed him, however, in a special way at the close of every week. It was his sanctum, containing little but his turning lathe and a shelf on which he could lay his open Bible. Here he spent hours at a time, denying himself on Saturdays to any and every visitor, and going without his midday meal that he might be the more free in spirit. The mechanical

occupation of the lathe he found helpful to a connected line of thought; so looking at the Bible from time to time, or dropping on his knees in prayer, he would turn out plates and trenchers, his mind occupied the while with the eternal interests of the Kingdom of God. 'Dear brother,' he exclaimed on meeting Mr. Taylor again six or seven years later, 'I have visited you every day since you went to China.' Who can tell how much the Inland Mission owes to the prayers that went up from that hidden corner in Barnstaple?"

A lifelong bachelor, he made prime use of his time. In bed by 9:00 p.m., he would rise at 3:30 or 4:00 each morning. He decided that a servant of God should spend as much time in the Word and in prayer as other men spend at their work benches. He often spent his entire morning in such occupation. He said, "It is one thing to read the Bible, choosing something that suits me (as is shamefully said), and another thing to search it that I may become acquainted with God in Christ."

In later years, Chapman took breakfast with his house guests at 7:00 a.m., dinner being at 12:00. The tabletalk was happy and edifying. After breakfast, Chapman commented on a chapter of Scripture--preceded by a hymn, and followed by prayer.

Chapman shunned backbiting. If someone told him of another's fault, he would say: "Let us go to our brother at once and tell him this." This silenced most accusers. Once a sister came to New Buildings to say, "I am greatly distressed about the conduct of..."

Chapman listened and when she ran out of accusations, he asked, "Is that all?"

"Well, there is another thing."

"Then tell me all." Once the story was all out Chapman said, "Please excuse me," and walked out of the room. When he re-entered, he had on an overcoat. With Bible in hand, he announced, "I am going now."

"But, Mr. Chapman, I came for your advice!"

"I will give it," he replied, "when you come with me to call on the sister. You see, I never judge by appearances but always hear both sides." After a string of protests, he convinced her to come along. When they came to the home of the accused, a remarkable change occurred. The complainer completely broke down in repentance, for she had been the culprit, and the Spirit of God convicted her of her unChristlike conduct. She was forgiven, and everyone rejoiced at the work of God in her heart.

After enduring a rather mediocre message, someone turned to Chapman and said, "I didn't think much of that, did you?"

"Let us tell him so," said Chapman, making as if to immediately confront the preacher. But seeing the critic was quite stunned, he then pointed out the uselessness and harm of such remarks behind the preacher's back.

Chapman refused any salary or financial arrangement with the congregation in Barnstaple or anywhere else. He never knew from week to week how the shelves of his pantry would be stocked.

Brother F. G. Bergin of Bristol related the following incident. Captain Henry Chapman, a cousin, came to Barnstaple out of curiosity, to see what his cousin had gotten involved in. Puzzled by how such a large household was supplied, he peeped into the pantry and found it almost bare. He asked his cousin to do him a favor--allow him to order some groceries. Robert consented gratefully, but on condition that the

order should be given at a certain shop that he named.

When the grocer asked where the goods were to be sent, and was directed to send them to Robert Chapman, his face changed, and he said he feared the order had been placed at the wrong shop. "No," said the Captain, "I wanted to make my cousin this little present and he specially directed me to come to you."

A tear came on the grocer's cheek: "I have heard of such things being done, but I never thought they really were. It was only last Saturday, at an open-air meeting, that I spat on Mr. Chapman's face!"

Frank Holmes told the rest of the story: "The man was completely broken down by this because he had for years made Mr. Chapman the target of his abuse and wicked criticism. In a short while he was at New Buildings, where Chapman's relative was amazed to see him lying prostrate before the man of God in tears and sincere repentance, asking for forgiveness, and yielding to Christ as his Saviour."

As before mentioned, the congregation at Ebenezer Chapel was denominationally affiliated when Chapman first came to Barnstaple. Reception into the congregation was one of the early issues Chapman faced. Despite his personal convictions, Chapman did not insist on immediate change at Ebenezer Chapel. For a time he followed their ingrained practices. He himself gladly went where there was room for the whole Bible, but he would not acknowledge sectarian distinctions. He treated denominational titles like the sound of fingernails squealing across a chalk board; their very mention grated upon his ears.

John Darby advised him to move more quickly to abandon the Particular Baptist tradition. Chapman shared the same goal, but felt that the aggressive approach would lead to fisticuffs in the foyer. So he patiently prayed, persuaded, and taught. He later wrote, "When 60 years since I came to this place, I waited for unity of heart and judgment among the company who called themselves Baptists; and when, by the power of the Scriptures, the greater part of them were minded to throw down their wall, we waited on in patience for fullness of unity of judgment...What we now enjoy here of mutual love and the Spirit's unity would never have been our portion had any other course been taken."

Often confronted with potentially explosive issues, Chapman did not forget that "love is patient" (1 Cor. 13:4) and that God's servants must be "gentle" (1 Tim. 3:3). In one circumstance, a breakaway party demanded the possession of the auditorium that the assembly used. With Chapman's encouragement, when the building was yielded over to them, he commented, "Just as I should give up my coat to a man who demanded it."

When doctrinal problems surfaced at Plymouth in the 1840s, Chapman found himself in a disagreement with John Darby about how those problems should be addressed. The unhappy outcome was polarization. This remained a lifelong sorrow to these brothers. Thereafter Chapman referred to those known as "exclusive" as "brethren dearly beloved and longed for," and as "brethren whose consciences led them to refuse my fellowship and to deprive me of theirs."

Likewise Darby respected his brother Chapman. The anecdote is told that Darby once heard some brothers speak critically of Chapman. He interrupted, saying, "You leave that man alone; he lives what I teach," and, "We talk about heavenly places, but Robert Chapman lives in them."

These difficulties, however, did not dampen his missionary zeal. Chapman was especially burdened for the work of the gospel in Spain. He was fluent in both Spanish and Portuguese. (In all, Chapman could

preach in five languages.) He visited Spain in 1838. Frederick Tatford summarized that mission: "...Accompanied by two brethren named Pick and Handcock. Although it was illegal and extremely risky, they took a number of Spanish Bibles with them and discreetly passed on the smuggled Bibles to interested persons. When they returned to England, Robert Chapman's prayers and his advocacy of the spiritual needs of the country aroused a considerable interest in British assemblies...At his next visit in 1863, he was accompanied by two workers, W. Gould and George Lawrence, whom he had encouraged to give themselves to the Lord's service in that country...They were pioneers in days of difficulty; it was five years before the first liberties were allowed, and they were faced by opposition and persecution in many places."

On his last trip to Spain in 1871, he was arrested for distributing Gospels at a train station. At the police station, he held up some money from his purse and asked, "Have I a right to throw this to the poor who beg at the station? Here is bread; have I a right to give this also?" Confounded, the police let the undaunted missionaries continue their journey.

The large-framed, erect gentleman looked a bit like old man winter with a smile. Called "the Patriarch of Barnstaple," he maintained a regular open-air preaching schedule until shortly before his home-going. The local newspaper editor so respected Chapman that he occasionally printed his entire messages.

His hymns, *Jesus in His Heavenly Temple*; *No Bone of Thee was Broken*; *No Condemnation, O My Soul*; *Oh, My Saviour Crucified*; *Show Me Thy Wounds, Exalted Lord*; *The Lamb of God to Slaughter Led*; and *With Jesus in Our Midst*, help us gauge Chapman's spiritual elevation. A. T. Pierson (who had hoped that he could write Chapman's biography) said that Chapman brought to mind the words, "There were giants in the earth in those days."

J. R. Caldwell said, "Truly the memory of his visit remains with us as a precious illustration of how far God can reproduce in a believer even here the image of His Son."

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