

Chapter 3. Making Ready The Chosen Vessel

~Other Speakers M-R: A.T. Pierson:

THE workman of God needs to wait on Him to know the work he is to do and the sphere where he is to serve Him.

Mature disciples at Halle advised George Müller for the time thus quietly to wait for divine guidance, and meanwhile to take no further steps toward the mission field. He felt unable, however, to dismiss the question, and was so impatient to settle it that he made the common blunder of attempting to come to a decision in a carnal way. He resorted to the lot, and not only so, but to the lot as cast in the lap of the lottery! In other words, he first drew a lot in private, and then bought a ticket in a royal lottery, expecting his steps to be guided in a matter so solemn as the choice of a field for the service of God, by the turn of the "wheel of fortune"! Should his ticket draw a prize he would go; if not, stay at home. Having drawn a small sum, he accordingly accepted this as a "sign," and at once applied to the Berlin Missionary Society, but was not accepted because his application was not accompanied with his father's consent.

Thus a higher Hand had disposed while man proposed. God kept out of the mission field, at this juncture, one so utterly unfit for His work that he had not even learned that primary lesson that he who would work with God must first wait on Him and wait for Him, and that all undue haste in such a matter is worse than waste. He who kept Moses waiting forty years before He sent him to lead out captive Israel, who withdrew Saul of Tarsus three years into Arabia before he sent him as an apostle to the nations, and who left even His own Son thirty years in obscurity before His manifestation as Messiah-- this God is in no hurry to put other servants at work. He says to all impatient souls: "My time is not yet full come, but your time is always ready."

Only twice after this did George Müller ever resort to the lot: once at a literal parting of the ways when he was led by it to take the wrong fork of the road, and afterward in a far more important matter, but with a like result: in both cases he found he had been misled, and henceforth abandoned all such chance methods of determining the mind of God.

He learned two lessons, which new dealings of God more and more deeply impressed:

First, that the safe guide in every crisis is believing prayer in connection with the word of God;

Secondly, that continued uncertainty as to one's course is a reason for continued waiting.

These lessons should not be lightly passed over, for they are too valuable. The flesh is impatient of all delay, both in decision and action; hence all carnal choices are immature and premature, and all carnal courses are mistaken and unspiritual. God is often moved to delay that we may be led to pray, and even the answers to prayer are deferred that the natural and carnal spirit may be kept in check and self-will may bow before the will of God.

In a calm review of his course many years later George Müller saw that he "ran hastily to the lot" as a shorter way of settling a doubtful matter, and that, especially in the question of God's call to the mission field, this was shockingly improper. He saw also how unfit he had been at that time for the work he sought: he should rather have asked himself how one so ignorant and so needing to be taught could think of teaching others! Though a child of God, he could not as yet have given a clear statement or explanation of the most elementary gospel truths. The one thing needful was therefore to have sought through much prayer and Bible study to get first of all a deeper knowledge and a deeper experience of divine things.

Impatience to settle a matter so important was itself seen to be a positive disqualification for true service, revealing unfitness to endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. There is a constant strain and drain on patient waiting which is a necessary feature of missionary trial and particularly the trial of deferred harvests. One who, at the outset, could not brook delay in making his first decision, and wait for God to make known His will in His own way and time, would not on the field have had long patience as a husbandman, waiting for the precious fruit of his toil, or have met with quietness of spirit the thousand perplexing problems of work among the heathen!

Moreover the conviction grew that, could he have followed the lot, his choice would have been a life-mistake. His mind, at that time, was bent upon the East Indies as a field. Yet all subsequent events clearly showed that God's choice for him was totally different. His repeated offers met as repeated refusals, and though on subsequent occasions he acted most deliberately and solemnly, no open door was found, but he was in every

case kept from following out his honest purpose. Nor could the lot be justified as an indication of his ultimate call to the mission field, for the purpose of it was definite, namely, to ascertain, not whether at some period of his life he was to go forth, but whether at that time he was to go or stay.

The whole after-life of George Müller proved that God had for him an entirely different plan, which He was not ready yet to reveal, and which His servant was not yet prepared to see or follow. If any man's life ever was a plan of God, surely this life was; and the Lord's distinct, emphatic leading, when made known, was not in this direction. He had purposed for George Müller a larger field than the Indies, and a wider witness than even the gospel message to heathen peoples. He was "not suffered" to go into "Bithynia" because "Macedonia" was waiting for his ministry.

With increasing frequency, earnestness, and minuteness, was George Müller led to put before God, in prayer, all matters that lay upon his mind. This man was to be peculiarly an example to believers as an intercessor; and so God gave him from the outset a very simple, childlike disposition toward Himself. In many things he was in knowledge and in strength to outgrow childhood and become a man, for it marks immaturity when we err through ignorance and are overcome through weakness. But in faith and in the filial spirit, he always continued to be a little child. Mr. J. Hudson Taylor well reminds us that while in nature the normal order of growth is from childhood to manhood and so to maturity, in grace the true development is perpetually backward toward the cradle: must become and continue as little children, not losing, but rather gaining, childlikeness of spirit. The disciple's maturest manhood is only the perfection of his childhood. George Müller was never so really, truly, fully a little child in all his relations to his Father, as when in the ninety-third year of his age.

Being thus providentially kept from the Indies, he began definite work at home, though yet having little real knowledge of the divine art of coworking with God. He spoke to others of their soul's welfare, and wrote to former companions in sin, and circulated tracts and missionary papers. Nor were his labours without encouragement, though sometimes his methods were awkward or even grotesque, as when, speaking to a beggar in the fields about his need of salvation, he tried to overcome apathetic indifference by speaking louder and louder, as though mere bawling in his ears would subdue the hardness of his heart!

In 1826 he first attempted to preach. An unconverted schoolmaster some six miles from Halle he was the means of turning to the Lord; and this schoolmaster asked him to come and help an aged, infirm clergyman in the parish. Being a student of divinity he was at liberty to preach, but conscious ignorance had hitherto restrained him. He thought, however, that by committing some other man's sermon to memory he might profit the hearers, and so he undertook it. It was slavish work to prepare, for it took most of a week to memorize the sermon, and it was joyless work to deliver it, for there was none of the living power that attends a man's God-given message and witness. His conscience was not yet enlightened enough to see that he was acting a false part in preaching another's sermon as his own; nor had he the spiritual insight to perceive that it is not God's way to set up a man to preach who knows not enough of either His word or the life of the Spirit within him, to prepare his own discourse. How few even among preachers feel preaching to be a divine vocation and not a mere human profession; that a ministry of the truth implies the witness of experience, and that to preach another man's sermon is, at the best, unnatural walking on stilts!

George Müller "got through" his painful effort of August 27, 1826, reciting this memoriter sermon at eight A.M. in the chapel of ease, and three hours later in the parish church. Being asked to preach again in the afternoon, but having no second sermon committed to memory, he had to keep silent, or depend on the Lord for help. He thought he could at least read the fifth chapter of Matthew, and simply expound it. But he had no sooner begun the first beatitude than he felt himself greatly assisted. Not only were his lips opened, but the Scriptures were opened too, his own soul expanded, and a peace and power wholly unknown to his tame, mechanical repetitions of the morning, accompanied the simpler expositions of the afternoon, with this added advantage, that he talked on a level with the people and not over their heads, his colloquial, earnest speech riveting their attention.

Going back to Halle, he said to himself, "This is the true way to preach," albeit he felt misgivings lest such a simple style of exposition might not suit so well a cultured refined city congregation. He had yet to learn how the enticing words of man's wisdom make the cross of Christ of none effect, and how the very simplicity that makes preaching intelligible to the illiterate makes sure that the most cultivated will also understand it, whereas the reverse is not true.

Here was another very important step in his preparation for subsequent service. He was to rank throughout life among the simplest and most scriptural of preachers. This first trial of pulpit-work led to frequent sermons, and in proportion as his speech was in the simplicity that is in Christ did he find joy in his work and a harvest from

it. The committed sermon of some great preacher might draw forth human praise, but it was the simple witness of the Word, and of the believer to the Word, that had praise of God. His preaching was not then much owned of God in fruit. Doubtless the Lord saw that he was not ready for reaping, and scarcely for sowing: there was yet too little prayer in preparation and too little unction in delivery, and so his labours were comparatively barren of results.

About this same time he took another step-- perhaps the most significant thus far in its bearing on the precise form of work so closely linked with his name. For some two months he availed himself of the free lodgings furnished for poor divinity students in the famous Orphan Houses built by A. H. Franck. This saintly man, a professor of divinity at Halle, who had died a hundred years before (1727), had been led to found an orphanage in entire dependence upon God. Half unconsciously George Müller's whole life-work at Bristol found both its suggestion and pattern in Franck's orphanage at Halle. The very building where this young student lodged was to him an object lesson-- a visible, veritable, tangible proof that the Living God hears prayer, and can, in answer to prayer alone, build a house for orphan children. That lesson was never lost, and George Müller fell into the apostolic succession of such holy labour! He often records how much his own faith-work was indebted to that example of simple trust in prayer exhibited by Franck. Seven years later he read his life, and was thereby still more prompted to follow him as he followed Christ.

George Müller's spiritual life in these early days was strangely chequered. For instance, he who, as a Lutheran divinity student, was essaying to preach, hung up in his room a framed crucifix, hoping thereby to keep in mind the sufferings of Christ and so less frequently fall into sin. Such helps, however, availed him little, for while he rested upon such artificial props, it seemed as though he sinned the oftener.

He was at this time overworking, writing sometimes fourteen hours a day, and this induced nervous depression, which exposed him to various temptations. He ventured into a confectioner's shop where wine and beer were sold, and then suffered reproaches of conscience for conduct so unbecoming a believer; and he found himself indulging ungracious and ungrateful thoughts of God, who, instead of visiting him with deserved chastisement, multiplied His tender mercies.

He wrote to a rich, liberal and titled lady, asking a loan, and received the exact sum asked for, with a letter, not from her, but from another into whose hands his letter had fallen by "a peculiar providence," and who signed it as "An adoring worshipper of the Saviour Jesus Christ." While led to send the money asked for, the writer added wise words of caution and counsel-- words so fitted to George Müller's exact need that he saw plainly the higher Hand that had guided the anonymous writer. In that letter he was urged to "seek by watching and prayer to be delivered from all vanity and self-complacency," to make it his "chief aim to be more and more humble, faithful, and quiet," and not to be of those who "say 'Lord, Lord,' but have Him not deeply in their hearts." He was also reminded that "Christianity consists not in words but in power, and that there must be life in us."

He was deeply moved by this message from God through an unknown party, and the more as it had come, with its enclosure, at the time when he was not only guilty of conduct unbecoming a disciple, but indulging hard thoughts of his heavenly Father. He went out to walk alone, and was so deeply wrought on by God's goodness and his own ingratitude that he knelt behind a hedge, and, though in snow a foot deep, he forgot himself for a half-hour in praise, prayer, and self-surrender.

Yet so deceitful is the human heart that a few weeks later he was in such a backslidden state that, for a time, he was again both careless and prayerless, and one day sought to drown the voice of conscience in the wine-cup. The merciful Father gave not up his child to folly and sin. He who once could have gone to great lengths in dissipation now found a few glasses of wine more than enough; his relish for such pleasures was gone, and so was the power to silence the still small voice of conscience and of the Spirit of God.

Such vacillations in Christian experience were due in part to the lack of holy associations and devout companionships. Every disciple needs help in holy living, and this young believer yearned for that spiritual uplift afforded by sympathetic fellow believers. In vacation times he had found at Gnadau, the Moravian settlement some three miles from his father's residence, such soul refreshment, but Halle itself supplied little help. He went often to church, but seldom heard the gospel, and in that town of over 30,000, with all its ministers, he found not one enlightened clergyman. When, therefore, he could hear such a preacher as Dr. Tholuck, he would walk ten or fifteen miles to enjoy such a privilege. The meetings continued at Mr. Wagner's house; and on the Lord's day evenings some six or more believing students were wont to gather, and both these assemblies were means of grace. From Easter, 1827, so long as he remained in Halle, this latter meeting was held in his own room, and must rank alongside those little gatherings of the "Holy Club" in Lincoln College,

Oxford, which a hundred years before had shaped the Wesleys and Whitefield for their great careers. Before George M^lller left Halle the attendance at this weekly meeting in his room had grown to twenty.

These assemblies were throughout very simple and primitive. In addition to prayer, singing, and reading of God's word, one or more brethren exhorted or read extracts from devout books. Here young M^lller freely opened his heart to others, and through their counsels and prayers was delivered from many snares.

One lesson, yet to be learned, was that the one fountain of all wisdom and strength is the Holy Scriptures. Many disciples practically prefer religious books to the Book of God. He had indeed found much of the reading with which too many professed believers occupy their minds to be but worthless chaff-- such as French and German novels; but as yet he had not formed the habit of reading the word of God daily and systematically as in later life, almost to the exclusion of other books. In his ninety-second year, he said to the writer, that for every page of any other reading he was sure he read ten of the Bible. But, up to that November day in 1825 when he first met a praying band of disciples, he had never to his recollection read one chapter in the Book of books; and for the first four years of his new life he gave to the works of uninspired men practical preference over the Living Oracles.

After a true relish for the Scriptures had been created, he could not understand how he could ever have treated God's Book with such neglect. It seemed obvious that God having condescended to become an Author, inspiring holy men to write the Scriptures, He would in them impart the most vital truths; His message would cover all matters which concern man's welfare, and therefore, under the double impulse of duty and delight, we should instinctively and habitually turn to the Bible. Moreover, as he read and studied this Book of God, he felt himself admitted to more and more intimate acquaintance with the Author. During the last twenty years of his life he read it carefully through, four or five times annually, with a growing sense of his own rapid increase in the knowledge of God thereby.

Such motives for Bible study it is strange that any true believer should overlook. Ruskin, in writing "Of the King's Treasures," refers to the universal ambition for "advancement in life," which means "getting into good society." How many obstacles one finds in securing an introduction to the great and good of this world, and even then in getting access to them, in securing an audience with the kings and queens of human society! Yet there is open to us a society of people of the very first rank who will meet us and converse with us so long as we like, whatever our ignorance, poverty, or low estate-- namely, the society of authors; and the key that unlocks their private audience-chamber is their books.

So writes Ruskin, and all this is beautifully true; but how few, even among believers, appreciate the privilege of access to the great Author of the universe through His word! Poor and rich, high and low, ignorant and learned, young and old, all alike are welcomed to the audience-chamber of the King of kings. The most intimate knowledge of God is possible on one condition-- that we search His Holy Scriptures, prayerfully and habitually, and translate what we there find, into obedience. Of him who thus meditates on God's law day and night, who looks and continues looking into this perfect law of liberty, the promise is unique, and found in both Testaments:

"Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper";
"that man shall be blessed in his deed."
(Comp. Psalm i. 3; Joshua i. 8; James i. 25.)

So soon as George M^lller found this well-spring of delight and success, he drank habitually at this fountain of living waters. In later life he lamented that, owing to his early neglect of this source of divine wisdom and strength, he remained so long in spiritual infancy, with its ignorance and impotence. So long and so far as his growth in knowledge of God was thus arrested his growth in grace was likewise hindered. His close walk with God began at the point where he learned that such walk is always in the light of that inspired word which is divinely declared to be to the obedient soul "a lamp unto the feet and a light unto the path." He who would keep up intimate converse with the Lord must habitually find in the Scriptures the highway of such companionship. God's aristocracy, His nobility, the princes of His realm, are not the wise, mighty, and high-born of earth, but often the poor, weak, despised of men, who abide in His presence and devoutly commune with Him through His inspired word.

Blessed are they who have thus learned to use the key which gives free access, not only to the King's Treasures, but to the King Himself!