

Chapter 4. New Steps And Stages Of Preparation

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

Passion for souls is a divine fire, and in the heart of George Müller that fire now began to burn more brightly, and demanded vent.

In August, 1827, his mind was more definitely than before turned toward mission work. Hearing that the Continental Society of Britain sought a minister for Bucharest, he offered himself through Dr. Tholuck, who, in behalf of the Society, was on the lookout for a suitable candidate. To his great surprise his father gave consent, though Bucharest was more than a thousand miles distant and as truly missionary ground as any other field. After a short visit home he came back to Halle, his face steadfastly set toward his far-off field, and his heart seeking prayerful preparation for expected self-sacrifice and hardship. But God had other plans for His servant, and he never went to Bucharest.

In October following, Hermann Ball, passing through Halle, and being at the little weekly meeting in Müller's room, told him how failing health forbade his continuing his work among Polish Jews; and at once there sprang up in George Müller's mind a strong desire to take his place. Such work doubly attracted him, because it would bring him into close contact with God's chosen but erring people, Israel; and because it could afford opportunity to utilize those Hebrew studies which so engrossed him.

At this very time, calling upon Dr. Tholuck, he was asked, to his surprise, whether he had ever felt a desire to labour among the Jews-- Dr. Tholuck then acting as agent for the London Missionary Society for promoting missions among them. This question naturally fanned the flame of his already kindled desire; but, shortly after, Bucharest being the seat of the war then raging between the Russians and Turks, the project of sending a minister there was for the time abandoned. But a door seemed to open before him just as another shut behind him.

The committee in London, learning that he was available as a missionary to the Jews, proposed his coming to that city for six months as a missionary student to prepare for the work. To enter thus on a sort of probation was trying to the flesh, but, as it seemed right that there should be opportunity for mutual acquaintance between committee and candidate, to insure harmonious cooperation, his mind was disposed to accede to the proposal.

There was, however, a formidable obstacle. Prussian male subjects must commonly serve three years in the army, and classical students who have passed the university examinations, at least one year. George Müller, who had not served out even this shorter term, could not, without royal exemption, even get a passport out of the country. Application was made for such exemption, but it failed. Meanwhile he was taken ill, and after ten weeks suffered a relapse. While at Leipsic with an American professor with whom he went to the opera, he unwisely partook of some refreshments between the acts, which again brought on illness. He had broken a blood-vessel in the stomach, and he returned to Halle, never again to enter a theatre. Subsequently being asked to go to Berlin for a few weeks to teach German, he went, hoping at the Prussian capital to find access to the court through persons of rank and secure the desired exemption. But here again he failed. There now seemed no way of escaping a soldier's term, and he submitted himself for examination, but was pronounced physically unfit for military duty. In God's providence he fell into kind hands, and, being a second time examined and found unfit, he was thenceforth completely exempted for life from all service in the army.

God's lines of purpose mysteriously converged. The time had come; the Master spake and it was done: all things moved in one direction-- to set His servant free from the service of his country, that, under the Captain of his salvation, he might endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ, without entanglement in the affairs of this life. Aside from this, his stay at the capital had not been unprofitable, for he had preached five times a week in the poorhouse and conversed on the Lord's days with the convicts in the prison.

In February, 1829, he left for London, on the way visiting his father at Heimersleben, where he had returned after retirement from office; and he reached the English metropolis March 19th. His liberty was much curtailed as a student in this new seminary, but, as no rule conflicted with his conscience, he submitted. He studied about twelve hours daily, giving attention mainly to Hebrew and cognate branches closely connected with his expected field. Sensible of the risk of that deadness of soul which often results from undue absorption in mental studies, he committed to memory much of the Hebrew Old Testament and pursued his tasks in a prayerful spirit, seeking God's help in matters, however minute, connected with daily duty.

Tempted to the continual use of his native tongue by living with his German countrymen, he made little

progress in English, which he afterward regretted; and he was wont, therefore, to counsel those who propose to work among a foreign people, not only to live among them in order to learn their language, but to keep aloof as far as may be from their own countrymen, so as to be compelled to use the tongue which is to give them access to those among whom they labour.

In connection with this removal to Britain a seemingly trivial occurrence left upon him a lasting impress--another proof that there are no little things in life. Upon a very small hinge a huge door may swing and turn. It is, in fact, often the apparently trifling events that mould our history, work, and destiny.

A student incidentally mentioned a dentist in Exeter-- a Mr. Grove who for the Lord's sake had resigned his calling with fifteen hundred pounds a year, and with wife and children offered himself as missionary to Persia, simply trusting the Lord for all temporal supplies. This act of self-denying trust had a strange charm for Mr. M^{iller}, and he could not dismiss it from his mind; indeed, he distinctly entered it in his journal and wrote about it to friends at home. It was another lesson in faith, and in the very line of that trust of which for more than sixty years he was to be so conspicuous an example and illustration.

In the middle of May, 1829, he was taken ill and felt himself to be past recovery. Sickness is often attended with strange self-disclosure. His conviction of sin and guilt at his conversion was too superficial and shallow to leave any after-remembrance. But, as is often true in the history of God's saints, the sense of guilt, which at first seemed to have no roots in conscience and scarce an existence, struck deeper into his being and grew stronger as he knew more of God and grew more like Him. This common experience of saved souls is susceptible of easy explanation. Our conceptions of things depend mainly upon two conditions: first, the clearness of our vision of truth and duty; and secondly, the standard of measurement and comparison. The more we live in God and unto God, the more do our eyes become enlightened to see the enormity and deformity of sin, so that we recognize the hatefulness of evil more distinctly: and the more clearly do we recognize the perfection of God's holiness and make it the pattern and model of our own holy living.

The amateur musician or artist has a false complacency in his own very imperfect work only so far as his ear or eye or taste is not yet trained to accurate discrimination; but, as he becomes more accomplished in a fine art, and more appreciative of it, he recognizes every defect or blemish of his previous work, until the musical performance seems a wretched failure and the painting a mere daub. The change, however, is wholly in the workman and not in the work, both the music and the painting are in themselves just what they were, but the man is capable of something so much better, that his standard of comparison is raised to a higher level, and his capacity for a true judgment is correspondingly enlarged.

Even so a child of God who, like Elijah, stands before Him as a waiting, willing, obedient servant, and has both likeness to God and power with God, may get under the juniper-tree of despondency, cast down with the sense of unworthiness and ill desert. As godliness increases the sense of ungodliness becomes more acute, and so feelings never accurately gauge real assimilation to God. We shall seem worst in our own eyes when in His we are best, and conversely.

A Mohammedan servant ventured publicly to challenge a preacher who, in an Indian bazaar, was asserting the universal depravity of the race, by affirming that he knew at least one woman who was immaculate, absolutely without fault, and that woman, his own Christian mistress. The preacher bethought himself to ask in reply whether he had any means of knowing whether that was her opinion of herself, which caused the Mohammedan to confess that there lay the mystery: she had been often overheard in prayer confessing herself the most unworthy of sinners.

To return from this digression, Mr. M^{iller}, not only during this illness, but down to life's sudden close, had a growing sense of sin and guilt which would at times have been overwhelming, had he not known upon the testimony of the Word that "whoso covereth his sins shall not prosper, but he that confesseth and forsaketh them shall find mercy." From his own guilt he turned his eyes to the cross where it was atoned for, and to the mercy-seat where forgiveness meets the penitent sinner; and so sorrow for sin was turned into the joy of the justified.

This confidence of acceptance in the Beloved so stripped death of its terrors that during this illness he longed rather to depart and to be with Christ; but after a fortnight he was pronounced better, and, though still longing for the heavenly rest, he submitted to the will of God for a longer sojourn in the land of his pilgrimage, little foreseeing what joy he was to find in living for God, or how much he was to know of the days of heaven upon earth.

During this illness, also, he showed the growing tendency to bring before the Lord in prayer even the minutest matters which his later life so signally exhibited. He constantly besought God to guide his physician, and every new dose of medicine was accompanied by a new petition that God would use it for his good and enable him with patience to await His will. As he advanced toward recovery he sought rest at Teignmouth, where, shortly after his arrival, "Ebenezer" chapel was reopened. It was here also that Mr. M^äller became acquainted with Mr. Henry Craik, who was for so many years not only his friend, but fellow labourer.

It was also about this time that, as he records, certain great truths began to be made clear to him and to stand out in much prominence. This period of personal preparation is so important in its bearing on his whole after-career that the reader should have access to his own witness.*

*See Appendix B.

On returning to London, prospered in soul-health as also in bodily vigor, he proposed to fellow students a daily morning meeting, from 6 to 8, for prayer and Bible study, when each should give to the others such views of any passage read as the Lord might give him. These spiritual exercises proved so helpful and so nourished the appetite for divine things that, after continuing in prayer late into the evening hours, he sometimes at midnight sought the fellowship of some like-minded brother, and thus prolonged the prayer season until one or two o'clock in the morning; and even then sleep was often further postponed by his overflowing joy in God. Thus, under his great Teacher, did this pupil, early in his spiritual history, learn that supreme lesson that to every child of God the word of God is the bread of life, and the prayer of faith the breath of life.

Mr. M^äller had been back in London scarcely ten days before health again declined, and the conviction took strong hold upon him that he should not spend his little strength in confining study, but at once get about his work; and this conviction was confirmed by the remembrance of the added light which God had given him and the deeper passion he now felt to serve Him more freely and fully. Under the pressure of this persuasion that both his physical and spiritual welfare would be promoted by actual labours for souls, he sought of the Society a prompt appointment to his field of service; and that they might with the more confidence commission him, he asked that some experienced man might be sent out with him as a fellow counsellor and labourer.

After waiting in vain for six weeks for an answer to this application, he felt another strong conviction: that to wait on his fellow men to be sent out to his field and work was unscriptural and therefore wrong. Barnabas and Saul were called by name and sent forth by the Holy Spirit, before the church at Antioch had taken any action; and he felt himself so called of the Spirit to his work that he was prompted to begin at once, without waiting for human authority,—and why not among the Jews in London? Accustomed to act promptly upon conviction, he undertook to distribute among them tracts bearing his name and address, so that any who wished personal guidance could find him. He sought them at their gathering-places, read the Scriptures at stated times with some fifty Jewish lads, and taught in a Sunday-school. Thus, instead of lying like a vessel in dry-dock for repairs, he was launched into Christian work, though, like other labourers among the despised Jews, he found himself exposed to petty trials and persecutions, called to suffer reproach for the name of Christ.

Before the autumn of 1829 had passed, a further misgiving laid hold of him as to whether he could in good conscience remain longer connected in the usual way with this London Society, and on December fifth he concluded to dissolve all such ties except upon certain conditions. To do full justice both to Mr. M^äller and the Society, his own words will again be found in the Appendix.*

*See Appendix C.

Early in the following year it was made clear that he could labour in connection with such a society only as they would consent to his serving without salary and labouring when and where the Lord might seem to direct. He so wrote, eliciting a firm but kind response to the effect that they felt it "inexpedient to employ those who were unwilling to submit to their guidance with respect to missionary operations," etc.

Thus this link with the Society was broken. He felt that he was acting up to the light God gave, and, while imputing to the Society no blame, he never afterward repented this step nor reversed this judgment. To those who review this long life, so full of the fruits of unusual service to God and man, it will be quite apparent that the Lord was gently but persistently thrusting George M^äller out of the common path into one where he was to walk very closely with Himself; and the decisions which, even in lesser matters furthered God's purpose were wiser and weightier than could at the time be seen.

One is constantly reminded in reading Mr. M^äller's journal that he was a man of like frailties as others. On

Christmas morning of this year, after a season of peculiar joy, he awoke to find himself in the Slough of Despond, without any sense of enjoyment, prayer seeming as fruitless as the vain struggles of a man in the mire. At the usual morning meeting he was urged by a brother to continue in prayer, notwithstanding, until he was again melted before the Lord-- a wise counsel for all disciples when the Lord's presence seems strangely withdrawn. Steadfast continuance in prayer must never be hindered by the want of sensible enjoyment; in fact, it is a safe maxim that the less joy, the more need. Cessation of communion with God, for whatever cause, only makes the more difficult its resumption and the recovery of the prayer habit and prayer spirit; whereas the persistent outpouring of supplication, together with continued activity in the service of God, soon brings back the lost joy. Whenever, therefore, one yields to spiritual depression so as to abandon, or even to suspend, closet communion or Christian work, the devil triumphs.

So rapid was Mr. M^{rs} Miller's recovery out of this Satanic snare, through continuance in prayer, that, on the evening of that same Christmas day whose dawn had been so overcast, he expounded the Word at family worship in the house where he dined by invitation, and with such help from God that two servants who were present were deeply convicted of sin and sought his counsel.

Here we reach another mile-stone in this life-journey. George M^{rs} Miller had now come to the end of the year 1829, and he had been led of the Lord in a truly remarkable path. It was but about four years since he first found the narrow way and began to walk in it, and he was as yet a young man, in his twenty-fifth year. Yet already he had been taught some of the grand secrets of a holy, happy, and useful life, which became the basis of the whole structure of his after-service.

Indeed, as we look back over these four years, they seem crowded with significant and eventful experiences, all of which forecast his future work, though he as yet saw not in them the Lord's sign. His conversion in a primitive assembly of believers where worship and the word of God were the only attractions, was the starting-point in a career every step of which seems a stride forward. Think of a young convert, with such an ensnaring past to reproach and retard him, within these few years learning such advanced lessons in renunciation: burning his manuscript novel, giving up the girl he loved, turning his back on the seductive prospect of ease and wealth, to accept self-denial for God, cutting loose from dependence on his father and then refusing all stated salary lest his liberty of witness be curtailed, and choosing a simple expository mode of preaching, instead of catering to popular taste! Then mark how he fed on the word of God; how he cultivated the habits of searching the Scriptures and praying in secret; how he threw himself on God, not only for temporal supplies, but for support in bearing all burdens, however great or small; and how thus early he offered himself for the mission field and was impatiently eager to enter it. Then look at the sovereign love of God, imparting to him in so eminent a degree the childlike spirit, teaching him to trust not his own variable moods of feeling, but the changeless word of His promise; teaching him to wait patiently on Him for orders, and not to look to human authority or direction; and so singularly releasing him from military service for life, and mysteriously withholding him from the far-off mission field, that He might train him for his unique mission to the race and the ages to come!

These are a few of the salient points of this narrative, thus far, which must, to any candid mind, demonstrate that a higher Hand was moulding this chosen vessel on His potter's wheel, and shaping it unmistakably for the singular service to which it was destined!