

CFBC Hymns Class 30
Robert Murray McCheyne (1813-1843)

Selected Quotes from Robert Murray McCheyne...

“Rose early to seek God and found Him whom my soul loveth. Who would not rise early to meet such company?”

“If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me.”

“A man is what he is on his knees before God, and nothing more.”

“For every look at self, take ten looks at Christ.”

“Live near to God, and all things will appear little to you in comparison with eternal realities.”

“You will be incomplete Christians if you do not look for the coming again of the Lord Jesus”

“Lord make me as holy as a pardoned sinner can be.”

“A man who loves you the most is the man who tells you the most truth about yourself.”

“It is a sure mark of grace to desire more.”

You will never find Jesus so precious as when the world is one vast howling wilderness. Then he is like a rose blooming in the midst of the desolation, a rock rising above the storm.”

Set NOT your hearts on the flowers of this world. They shall fade and die. Prize the Rose of Sharon and the Lily of the Valley. He changes not! Live nearer to Christ than to any person on this earth; so that when they are taken, you may have Him to love and lean upon.”

The Life of Robert Murray McCheyne (Banner of Truth, 1955)

Two men were working beside a fire in a quarry, one day in winter, when a stranger approached them on horseback. Alighting from his horse he began to enter into conversation on the state of their souls and drew some alarming truths

from the blazing fire. The men were surprised, and exclaimed ‘Ye’re nae common man.’ ‘Oh yes,’ he replied, ‘just a common man.’ One cannot meet Robert Murray M’Cheyne either in his biography (so powerfully written by Andrew Bonar) or in his sermons, without receiving the impression which these men received in their personal encounter with him so long ago. His brief ministry of seven-and-a-half years ‘stamped an indelible impress on Scotland,’ and though he died in his twenty-ninth year, more was wrought by him that will last for eternity than most accomplish in a lifetime. If we could summon but one life from the past, the lessons of which would apply most directly to this slothful and careless generation, perhaps it would be the life of Robert M’Cheyne. After his death, a fellow minister wrote, “Indolence and levity and unfaithfulness are sins that beset me ; and his living presence was a rebuke to all these, for I never knew one so instant in season and out of season, so impressed with the invisible realities, and so faithful in reproofing sin and witnessing for Christ.”

EARLY YEARS (1813 – 1827)

Robert M’Cheyne was born in Edinburgh in May, 1813, the youngest child in a family of five. His father was a prosperous lawyer and a man of social importance. Their spacious home, with its gardens, commanded a glorious view across to the shores of Fife. Here in Edinburgh M’Cheyne spent his childhood and youth. After passing successfully through the High School, he entered the Arts Faculty of the University in autumn 1827. “He was of a lively turn” – his father later recorded – “and, during the first two or three years of his attendance at the University, he turned his attention to elocution and poetry and the pleasures of society.” M’Cheyne became at this time an eager participant in the city’s fashionable entertainments, and scenes of gaiety – card playing, dancing, music – occupied his leisure hours.

HIS AWAKENING (1831 – 1835)

But he was the subject of his elder brother’s fervent prayers, and the early death of this brother in 1831 was a stroke which was used to awaken Robert from the sleep of nature. It was “the first overwhelming blow to my worldliness.” He began to be serious, and to sit under an evangelical ministry. In the winter of 1831, following his desire to enter the ministry, he entered the Divinity Hall of the University. Under the leadership of men like Chalmers and Welsh there was a new stir of spiritual life in the College at this time, indeed it proved to be a new stir in the life of the Church of Scotland.

We can trace from his diary in the following years a growing grasp of Scriptural truth, a growing desire to live in communion with God and under the power of the world to come.

Entries like this speak for themselves:–

June 22. “Bought Edwards’ works. Truly there was nothing in me that should have induced Him to choose me. I was but as the other brands upon whom the fire is already kindled, which shall burn for evermore!”

August 15. “Awfully important question, Am I redeeming the time?”

February 23. “Sabbath. Rose early to seek God, and found Him whom my soul loveth. Who would not rise early to meet such company?”

Reading the biographies of past ministers had a profound influence on M’Cheyne at this time, especially such lives as Jonathan Edwards, Brainerd, Martyn, Payson, and Halyburton. In fact he became so familiar with the works of the first named, that Edwards’ ‘Resolutions’ became exemplified in M’Cheyne –

- “Resolved never to lose one moment of time, but to improve it in the most profitable way I possibly can.”
- “Resolved, That I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I had come to die.”
- “Resolved, To live with all my might, while I do live ..”

From a letter M’Cheyne later wrote to a student, we can see what rules he applied to himself – “Do get on with your studies. Remember you are now forming the character of your future ministry, if God spare you. If you acquire slovenly or sleepy habits of study now, you will never get the better of it. Do everything in earnest. Above all, keep much in the presence of God. Never see the face of man till you have seen His face who is our life, our all.”

The last entry of his student days is

“March 29, 1835. College finished on Friday last. My last appearance there. Life is vanishing fast, make haste for eternity.”

So ended his preparatory discipline, both of heart and mind. “His soul,” writes Bonar, “was prepared for the awful work of ministry by much prayer, and much study of the word of God ; by inward trials ; by experience of the depth of corruption in his own heart, and by discoveries of the Saviour’s fulness of grace.”

THE MINISTRY (1835 – 1836)

M’Cheyne was licensed by the presbytery of Annan on July 1st, 1835 and became “a preacher of the Gospel an honour to which I cannot name an equal.”

After a further period, largely of preparation for the future, as assistant to Mr. John Bonar the minister of Larbert and Dunipace, he was ordained minister of St. Peter's, Dundee, 1 November, 1836. It was a new church built in a sadly neglected district containing some 4,000 souls. "A city given to idolatry and hardness of heart," was his first impression. "A very dead region," is Bonar's description, "the surrounding mass of impenetrable heathenism cast its influence even on those few who were living Christians." "He has set me down among the noisy mechanics and political wavers of this godless town," M'Cheyne wrote.

There was nothing in his message to please such a people ; "If the Gospel pleased carnal men it would not be the Gospel," he declared. He was deeply persuaded that the Spirit's first work in salvation is to convict of sin, and to bring men to despair of their condition by nature, it was therefore on this note that his ministry commenced and continued – "Men must be brought down by law work to see their guilt and misery, or all our preaching is beating the air. A broken heart alone can receive a crucified Christ.

The most, I fear, in all congregations, are sailing easily down the stream into an undone eternity, unconverted and unawakened." Urgency and alarm characterised his message. "God help me to speak to you plainly! The longest lifetime is short enough. It is all that is given you to be converted in. In a very little, it will be all over ; and all that is here is changing – the very hills are crumbling down – the loveliest face is withering away – the finest garments rot and decay. Every day that passes is bringing you nearer to the judgment-seat. Not one of you is standing still. You may sleep ; but the tide is going on bringing you nearer death, judgment, and eternity.

HIS CHRISTIAN WALK

M'Cheyne was enabled to walk in a continual awareness of these truths – "I think I can say, I have never risen a morning without thinking how I could bring more souls to Christ." In his diary we find records like this:– "As I was walking in the fields, the thought came over me with almost overwhelming power, that every one of my flock must soon be in heaven or hell."

But there is another feature of M'Cheyne's life which is perhaps even more prominent than his constant longings for the salvation of souls. "Above all things, cultivate your own spirit," he wrote to a fellow-minister. "Your own soul is your first and greatest care. Seek advance of personal holiness.

"It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God. A word spoken by you when your

conscience is clear, and your heart full of God's Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin."

"Get your texts from God – your thoughts, your words, from God."

From his diary we gather his own private observations:

– "I ought to spend the best hours of the day in communion with God. It is my noblest and most fruitful employment"

– "The morning hours, from six to eight, are the most uninterrupted – After tea is my best hour, and that should be solemnly dedicated to God, if possible."

Bonar writes, "the real secret of his soul's prosperity lay in daily enlargement of his heart in fellowship with his God. Meditation and prayer were the very sinews of his work." Even when pressed by duties, "he kept by his rule, 'that he must first see the face of God before he could undertake any duty.'"

It was M'Cheyne's constant aim to avoid any hurry which prevents, "the calm working of the Spirit on the heart. The dew comes down when all nature is at rest – when every leaf is still. A calm hour with God is worth a whole lifetime with man"

A MINISTERS DUTY

M'Cheyne was ever concerned to deepen his ministry by continual study. "Few", says Bonar ; have maintained such an "undecaying esteem for the advantages of study." Though always conscious that souls were perishing every day, he never fell into the error of thinking that a minister's main work consists of outward activity. "The great fault I find with this generation is, they cry that ministers should be more in public ; they think that it is an easy thing to interpret the word of God, and to preach. But a minister's duty is not so much public as private." Two thick notebooks show that he was constantly storing his mind by reading the Puritans, and Reformers. This emphasis on personal growth he never lost. "Oh," he declared to a friend, "we preachers need to know God in another way than heretofore, in order to speak aright of sin and of salvation. The work of God would flourish by us, if it flourished more richly in us."

"The want of ministerial success," says Robinson, "is a tremendous circumstance, never to be contemplated without horror." Never to rest without success was M'Cheyne's unvarying aim ; though from his earliest days at St. Peter's his preaching was attended with saving power, and produced deep convictions and distress in the hearts of many, he and his people ever prayed for further manifestations of God's glory.

MISSION TO THE JEWS (1839)

But towards the end of 1838 the course of his ministry was interrupted by symptoms which alarmed his friends. He was attacked by violent palpitation of heart – the effect of unremitting labour. It soon increased, so that his medical advisers insisted on a total cessation of work. Accordingly M'Cheyne with deep regret returned to his parents home in Edinburgh, to rest until he could resume his ministry. This separation from his people occasioned some of his richest letters. "Ah!" he writes, "there is nothing like a calm look into the eternal world to teach us the emptiness of human praise, the sinfulness of self-seeking, the preciousness of Christ."

From the ten lengthy Pastoral Letters which he sent to his flock, we can quote but a paragraph of one :-

"Consider what fruit there is of believing in you. Have you really and fully uptaken Christ as the Gospel lays Him down ? – John 5:12. Do you cleave to Him as a sinner ? – 1 Timothy 1:15. Do you feel the glory of His person ? – Revelation 1:17 ; His finished work ? – Hebrews 9:26 ; His offices ? – 1 Corinthians 1:30. Does He shine like the sun into your soul ? – Malachi 4:2. Is your heart ravished with His beauty ? – Song of Solomon 5:16. Again, what fruit is there in you of crying after holiness ? Is this the one thing that you do ? – Philippians 3:13. Do you spend your life in cries for deliverance from this body of sin and death ? – Romans 7:24. Ah! I fear there is little of this. I fear you do not know "the exceeding greatness of His power" toward us who believe. I fear many of you are strangers to the visits of the Comforter."

Prolonged illness prevented M'Cheyne's speedy restoration to his people, and in the spring of 1839 it was proposed in Edinburgh that he should accompany a party of ministers who were to visit Palestine to make personal enquiries into the state of Israel. The voyage and climate it was thought would prove beneficial to him. His acceptance, and their subsequent travels to Jerusalem and Galilee we cannot pause to describe.

M'Cheyne had a particular missionary interest in the Jews. Consequently after the 1838 General Assembly decided to appoint a committee to examine the state of the Jews and what could be done, M'Cheyne was appointed as one of its members. Dr Alexander Black (Professor of Divinity in Aberdeen), Dr Alexander Keith (minister of St Cyrus) and Andrew Bonar were M'Cheyne's companions. On March 27th 1839 they sailed for London. During the course of their six month journey their letters home were published in the national and foreign press. The account of their journey, written by Bonar and M'Cheyne, was a best seller.

Even when far from them, the spiritual prosperity of his people in Dundee was uppermost in his heart. After surveying the barren spot in Galilee where Capernaum once stood, he wrote to them, "If you tread the glorious Gospel of the grace of God under your feet, your souls will perish ; and I fear Dundee will one day be a howling wilderness like Capernaum." "Ah! would my flock from thee might learn, How days of grace will flee ; How all an offered Christ who spurn, shall mourn at last, like thee."

Not long after the party had begun to return homewards through Asia Minor, M'Cheyne was taken dangerously ill. Towards the end of July, 1839 as he lay apparently dying near Smyrna, he believed it was not to his native Scotland but to his eternal home that he was going. "My most earnest prayer was for my dear flock." "The cry of his servant in Asia was not forgotten," writes Bonar ; "the eye of the Lord turned toward his people. Their pastor was at the gate of death, in utter helplessness. But the Lord had done this on very purpose ; for He meant to show that He needed not the help of any."

Whilst on their journey, revival broke out in St Peter's under the ministry of William Chalmers Burns. This revival was to continue through the remaining years of M'Cheyne's life.

REVIVAL (1839)

W. C. Burns – a young man of twenty-four – was supplying M'Cheyne's place at Dundee in his absence. It was under his preaching on 23rd of July that the great Revival at Kilsyth took place. "All Scotland heard the glad news that the sky was no longer brass. The Spirit in mighty power began to work from that day forward in many places of the land."

As soon as Burns resumed his ministry in Dundee early in August, the same effects occurred. The truth pierced hearts in an overwhelming manner – "tears were streaming from the eyes of many, and some fell on the ground groaning, and weeping, and crying for mercy." Services were held every night for many weeks – often lasting till late hours. The whole town was moved. The fear of God fell upon the ungodly. Anxious multitudes filled the churches.

When M'Cheyne, restored to health, returned to St. Peter's in November of that year, he viewed an unforgettable scene. A deep concern and impression of eternal realities possessed the vast congregation. In worship "the people felt that they were praising a present God." Such a sight as this was not uncommon throughout the remainder of his ministry. The grief at sin which filled the hearts of many could only be expressed by tears ; the distress expressed by one awakened sinner to M'Cheyne represented the feeling of scores – "I think," he said, "hell would be some relief from an angry God."

Such was the anxiety which now prevailed to hear the Gospel that even when M'Cheyne was preaching in the open air in the meadows at Dundee, and heavy rain began to fall, the dense crowd stood till the last. The Word was listened to on these occasions with "an awful and breathless stillness."

It was M'Cheyne's custom never to accept mere professions of faith as signs of conversion. "It is holy-making Gospel," he declared. "Without holy fruit all evidences are vain. Dear friends, you have awakenings, enlightenings, experiences, a full heart in prayer, and many due signs ; but if you want holiness, you will never see the Lord. A real desire after complete holiness is the truest mark of being born again. Jesus is a holy Saviour. He first covers the soul with His white raiment, then makes the soul glorious within – restores the lost image of God, and fills the soul with pure, heavenly holiness. Unregenerate men among you cannot bear this."

FINAL YEARS

As his ministry drew towards its solemn close, he became increasingly conscious of the brevity of time. "I do not expect to live long." "Changes are coming ; every eye before me shall soon be dim in death." "Another pastor shall feed this flock ; another singer lead the psalm; another flock shall fill this fold." "There is no believing, no repenting, no conversion in the grave – no minister will speak to you there. This is the time of conversion. Oh! My friends, you will have no ordinances in hell – there will be no preaching in hell." "Oh that you would use this little time! Every moment of it is worth a world."

In his last year at St. Peter's we find him preaching with terrible clearness on the eternal punishment of the unconverted – four sermons were devoted to this subject.

He never dreaded the reproach a dying woman addressed to John Newton – "you often spoke to me of Christ ; but oh you did not tell me enough about my danger."

"Brethren," M'Cheyne warned his fellow ministers, our people will not thank us in eternity for speaking smooth things, and crying Peace, peace, when there is no peace. No, they may praise us now, but they will curse our flattery in eternity."

At his last communion service in January 1843 he preached on "Paul a Pattern" (1 Timothy 1:16).

In February he was away in the north west of Scotland, and preached twenty-seven times, in twenty-four different places often travelling through heavy snow.

On his return to Dundee he confessed he felt “very tired.” March 12th proved to be his last Sabbath in the pulpit of St. Peter’s, his final sermon was from Romans 9:22 and 23. “What if God, willing to show his wrath” “It was observed,” writes Bonar, “both then and on other occasions, he spoke with peculiar strength upon the sovereignty of God.” The following Tuesday he felt ill but took a wedding service, and afterwards spoke to a group of children, who informally gathered round him, on “The Good Shepherd.”

It was his last public appearance ; that evening he succumbed to a fever which was prevalent in the parish at the time. After lying helplessly for a week with burning fever, a delirium overtook him on Tuesday 21st. His utterances now showed the thoughts which were uppermost in his mind. As if addressing his people he cried “You must be awakened in time, or you will be awakened in everlasting torment, to your eternal confusion.” Then he prayed, “This parish, Lord, this people, this whole place!”

MARCH 25TH 1843

Robert Murray M‘Cheyne died on Saturday, March 25th, 1843.

“Live for eternity. A few days more and our journey is done.” The truth, he had so often preached was accomplished. His desire was fulfilled – “Oh to be like Jesus, and with Him to all eternity!”

After two weeks illness and despite the Church being full every night of people praying, he died on 25 March.

Andrew Bonar’s diary for 25 March records:

‘This afternoon about 5 o’clock a message has just come to tell me of Robert M‘Cheyne’s death. Never, never in all my life have I felt anything like this. It is a blow to myself, to his people, to the Church of Christ in Scotland.’ “Life has lost half its joys, were it not for the hope of saving souls. There was no friend whom I loved like him”.

Bonar went straight to St Peter’s and prayed and spoke to an assembly bathed in tears, many sobbing aloud for grief. William Lamb, one of the Elders often found his eyes resting on the pulpit thinking, ‘It is empty tonight’.

Over six thousand people attended the funeral and immediately after M‘Cheyne’s death, Andrew Bonar, a close friend and colleague, wrote ‘The Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray McCheyne’. We have finished our outlines of the life of one who declared he was “just a common man.”

But our impression must surely be that such a ministry is very uncommon in our times. So ends the story of M'Cheyne's brief life.

CONCLUSION

It is then no small question for ministers to ask – “Where lies the difference between his ministry and ours?” No other questions are so vital as this, the answer is far from the minds of many.

First, M'Cheyne was different in doctrine. His preaching was clearly and definitely in line with the faith of the Reformers and Puritans. That glorious Puritan document, in which every doctrine is given its true Scriptural proportion – The Westminster Confession of Faith – was his constant text book. “Oh for the grace of the Westminster divines,” he writes, “to be poured out upon this generation of lesser men.” Ruin by the fall, Righteousness by Christ, and Regeneration by the Spirit was the substance of his preaching.

Sin has so ruined man's mind and heart that he has no will to be saved. “You will only have yourselves to blame if ye awake in hell. If you die, it is because you will die; and if you will die, then you must die.” Like all who apprehend this to be the true condition of men by nature, M'Cheyne clearly saw that without God's electing love and without the Divine power He exercises in conversion no soul would ever be saved. Unless He makes them willing in the day of His power they will never come.

After declaring the text ‘As many as were ordained to eternal life believed,’ he says “Every thinking man must know and feel that none will ever come to Christ but those who were given Him by the Father from all eternity.” “The only power that can bring a child of Satan and make him a child of God, is God Himself. Ah! dear friends, the power is not in creatures. It is not in the power of man – it is not in the power given to ministers; God alone can do it. Ah! my friends, this is a humbling doctrine. There is no difference between us and the children of wrath ; some of us were more wicked than they, yet God set his love on us. If there are any here that think that they have been chosen because they were better than others, you are grossly mistaken.” In conversion therefore the Divine work of regeneration must precede faith. The Spirit convicts the sinner that Christ alone is able to save him.

The constant aim of M'Cheyne's preaching to the awakened and converted was to bring them to see the vastness, completeness and freeness of the salvation brought by Christ. “Remember Jesus for us is all our righteousness before a holy God, and Jesus in us is all our strength in an ungodly world. He justifies sinners who have no righteousness, sanctifies souls that have no holiness.

Let Jesus bear your whole weight. Remember, He loves to be the only support of your soul. There is nothing that you can possibly need but you will find it in Him.” The most prominent cause of the absence of such ministries as M‘Cheyne’s to-day lies in the absence of his doctrine, for it is only the truth of God which the Spirit will honour and bless.

Secondly, M‘Cheyne was different in his life. I do not mean he was exempt from the conflict with indwelling sin known by the Apostle Paul (Romans 7) and by every Christian. On the contrary it was (as we see in his diary) the constant awareness of the “abyss of corruption” in his heart, that brought him into such continual dependence on Christ. “Our wicked heart taints all we say and do ; hence the need of continual atonement in the blood of Jesus. We must have daily, hourly pardons.” But he was different in that he ever lived as one on the brink of eternity, as one who longed for a “full conformity to God,” and prized communion with Him as his chief joy. He was ever reminding himself – “If I could follow the Lord more fully myself, my ministry would be used to make a deeper impression than it has yet done.”

Are we not rebuked by this minister who was given hundreds of souls as his reward? Have we not failed to estimate aright the value of near access to God? Is such a ministry needed in our times? The same Jesus reigns; the same Spirit is able; and the same source of grace is open to us. “Oh! brethren, be wise. ‘Why stand ye all the day idle?’ In a little moment it will be all over. A little while and the day of grace will be over – preaching, praying will be done. A little while, and we shall stand before the great white throne – a little while, and the wicked shall not be; we shall see them going away into everlasting punishment. A little while, and the work of eternity shall be begun. We shall be like Him –we shall see Him day and night in His temple – we shall sing the new song, without sin and without weariness, for ever and ever.”

This article was originally published in The Banner of Truth magazine (Issue 4, December 1955, pages 14-23), and is reproduced with permission from the publishers. This article was transcribed by David F. Haslam.

<https://www.mcheyne.info/his-life/>

When This Passing World is Done

When this passing world is done,
When has sunk yon glaring sun,
When we stand with Christ in glory,
Looking o'er life's finished story,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

When I hear the wicked call
On the rocks and hills to fall,
When I see them start and shrink
On the fiery deluge brink,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

When I stand before the throne,
Dressed in beauty not my own,
When I see thee as thou art,
Love thee with unsinning heart,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

When the praise of heav'n I hear,
Loud as thunders to the ear,
Loud as many waters' noise,
Sweet as harp's melodious voice,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

Chosen not for good in me,
Wakened up from wrath to flee,
Hidden in the Saviour's side,
By the Spirit sanctified,
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show,
By my love, how much I owe.

Original Trinity Hymnal, #600

Excerpt from Hymn Studies Blog...When This Passing World is Done

The song mentions several things related to the coming of the Lord and how that should affect us here.

Stanza 1 refers to the end of the world...

"When this passing world is done, When has sunk yon glaring sun,
When I stand with Christ on high, Looking o'er life's history—
(The original read: "When we stand with Christ in glory,
Looking o'er life's finished story," but was changed to fit the music)
Then, Lord, shall I fully know, Not till then, how much I owe."

- A. Someday this passing world will be done: 2 Pet. 3:10
- B. Then, we shall stand with Christ on high: Phil. 1:23
- C. And at that time, we shall fully realize how much we are truly debtors to Him: Rom. 8:12

Stanza 3 refers to standing before the throne...

"When I stand before the throne, Dressed in beauty not my own,
When I see Thee as Thou art, Love Thee with unsinning heart—
Then, Lord, shall I fully know, Not till then, how much I owe."

- A. At judgment we shall stand before the throne: Matt. 25:31-32
- B. The righteous will be dressed in beauty not their own but in robes made white by the blood of the Lamb: Rev. 7:14
- C. Then we shall see the Lord as He truly is: 1 Jn. 3:1-2

Stanza 4 refers to the praise of heaven...

"When the praise of heaven I hear, Loud as thunders to the ear,
Loud as many waters' noise, Sweet as harp's melodious voice—
Then, Lord, shall I fully know, Not till then, how much I owe."

- A. The praise of heaven is described as being like the voice of loud thunder: Rev. 14:1-2
- B. It is also described as being like the sound of many waters: Rev. 19:6
- C. And it is described as being like the sweet melody of the harp: Rev. 15:1-2

Stanza 5 refers to being chosen by the Savior...

"Chosen not for good in me, Wakened up from wrath to flee,
(The original read, "Waked from coming wrath to flee.")
Hidden in the Savior's side, By the Spirit sanctified—
Teach me, Lord, on earth to show, By my love, how much I owe."

- A. God chose us not for any good in and of ourselves but because of His love according to the good pleasure of His will: Eph. 1:4-5
- B. Those who respond to God's choice are hidden in the Savior's side: Col. 3:1-3
- C. Also they are sanctified by the Spirit: 1 Cor. 6:9-11

<https://hymnstudiesblog.wordpress.com/2009/12/26/quotwhen-this-passing-world-is-donequot/>

Jehovah Tsidkenu

In the hymn Robert Murray McCheyne meditates on our own sinfulness, and our necessary condemnation under the law of God. Our righteousness, however we may perceive it, can never match God's standards – it is 'like filthy rags.' But there is one who is fully righteous – and only one, and that one is Christ, who became our substitute at Calvary, took our sin, and imputed unto us His own righteousness. The whole theme of the hymn is how oblivious the sinner is to his own lostness, until awakened by God's sovereign grace and election to see his imperiled condition, and given faith to trust in Christ alone. Having so been called, redeemed, purchased by Christ's atoning blood, the sinner is safe in God's keeping, and assured of a heavenly home. It is a hymn which cannot be read without causing the redeemed believer to thank God for free salvation.

*I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load;
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.*

*I oft read with pleasure, to sooth or engage,
Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page;
But e'en when they pictured the blood sprinkled tree
Jehovah Tsidkenu seemed nothing to me.*

*Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,
I wept when the waters went over His soul;
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree
Jehovah Tsidkenu—'twas nothing to me.*

*When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;
No refuge, no safety in self could I see—
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Saviour must be.*

*My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;
My guilty fears banished, with boldness I came
To drink at the fountain, life giving and free—
Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me.*

*Jehovah Tsidkenu! my treasure and boast,
Jehovah Tsidkenu! I ne'er can be lost;
In thee I shall conquer by flood and by field,
My cable, my anchor, my breast-plate and shield!*

*Even treading the valley, the shadow of death,
This “watchword” shall rally my faltering breath;
For while from life’s fever my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu, my death song shall be.*

Excerpt from “Great Hymns and Their Writers” (Jehovah Tsidkenu)

It was in 1843, while recovering from a bout of the fever that was to cut short his life in its thirtieth year, that Robert Murray McCheyne wrote the words of his famous hymn which serve as a window to his thoughts in the great matter of his soul’s salvation.

McCheyne was an “upright sinner” in the early years of his life and, indeed, he tells us, was often mistaken for a Christian on account of his religious way of living. But, his “righteousness” was his own “self-righteousness,” and any thought of needing Christ’s righteousness and merits to atone for his sins had not yet manifest itself to his mind and heart.

“I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I knew not my danger, and felt not my load:
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.”

For all his open religion, McCheyne was “a stranger” both to the grace of God and the God of grace. And the reason he remained a stranger was on account of the absence of any burden of sin such as had lain heavily on the shoulders of old John Bunyan’s Pilgrim. He had, as yet, in no sense of “danger.”

That he was “by nature” among “the children of wrath, even as others;” and where there is no knowledge of any danger from the wrath to come, there is no fleeing from that wrath. His own righteousness – his own works – his own efforts – his own religion – was sufficient for him at this point in his life, and the righteousness of God – “Jehovah Tsidkenu” (The Lord, my Righteousness) as he says, “meant nothing to me.”

Oh yes, McCheyne could be “affected” by the Cross and the thought of Christ dying there; and how we need to appreciate this facet of our human nature in our modern-day approach to evangelism, for not everyone who is “affected” by the death of Christ is “saved” by the death of Christ. Listen to what McCheyne tells us:

“Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,
I wept when the waters went over His soul
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree
Jehovah Tsidkenu – ‘twas nothing to me.”

How “affected”, indeed, this hardened sinner was by the general doctrine of the blood-stained Cross of the dear Son of God, but there was, as yet, no particular application of that cross to his own heart. He had yet to learn the truth, “Jesus who loved me, and gave himself for me.” He had still to bow under the burden of guilt that it was he who had “pointed the nail, and fixed the thorn.”

But, “exalt free grace,” McCheyne seems to be saying to us as he comes to the turning point in his hymn, which relates the same turning point in his life. How does the sinner begin to see the “danger” that he is in by nature when under the condemnation and wrath of God? Only when God’s most Holy Law begins to shudder and shake the sin-hardened conscience so that we realise that “it is appointed unto men once to die, and after death the judgment.” And this “Law Work” – let us never forget it – is the prerogative working of God’s Holy Spirit in the lives of those “vessels of mercy ... afore prepared unto glory.”

“When free grace awoke me, by light from on high,” says McCheyne. For the grace that “awakens” the self-righteous sinner to see his need of the righteousness of God in Christ to save his soul is just as sovereign and free as every other grace that comes to him from the Hand of Omnipotence:

“When free grace awoke me by light from on high,
Then legal fears shook me”
(the mighty Law of God was having its perfect work)
“I trembled to die;
No refuge, no safety in self could I see –
Jehovah Tsidkenu, my Saviour, must be.”

This is the course that McCheyne’s pilgrimage in salvation took. From the sinner depending on his own self-righteousness to the saint depending on nothing short of the very righteousness of God itself. This alone underlies the God-honouring life that this choice servant of God lived, and which must motivate every professing child of God that would live righteously in Christ Jesus. Not my own righteousness, but the Lord’s righteousness, this alone brings the guilty sinner before the face of the God against whom he has sinned in thought, word, and deed; that he is “accepted in the Beloved,” and that the Name of Christ is the password of heaven that gains him entrance at last. So McCheyne discovered.

“Even treading the valley, the shadow of death,
This ‘Watchword’ shall rally my faltering breath;
For while from life’s fever my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu my death-song shall be.”

This Watchword, says McCheyne, for, indeed, he entitled his hymn, “Jehovah Tsidkenu – The Watchword of the Reformers,” and, it was that very thing. Ask Luther, or Calvin, or Knox where their hope of salvation lay; ask them as they handle the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God; ask them as they pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Their answer is McCheyne’s answer: “This Watchword shall rally my faltering breath – Jehovah Tsidkenu, The Lord my righteousness.”

As another great hymn puts it:

“I stand upon His merits,
I know no other stand
Not e’en where glory dwelleth
In Immanuel’s land.”

Not only in this life is there but one true refuge for the soul – one covering for our sin – one shelter in a time of storm, But –

“When from life’s fever, my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu my death-song shall be.”

Two other verses of the original hymn which don’t appear in the average hymn book also speak clearly the same doctrine of our acceptance before God only through the merits of Christ...

“I oft’ read with pleasure, to sooth or engage,
Isaiah’s wild measure and John’s simple page;
But e’en when they pictured the blood-sprinkled tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu seemed nothing to me.

Jehovah Tsidkenu! My treasure and boast,
Jehovah Tsidkenu! I ne’er can be lost;
In Thee, I shall conquer by flood and by field –
My cable, my anchor, my breastplate and shield!”

https://www.wicketgate.co.uk/e-books/great_hymns_and_their_writers.pdf

In Conclusion...A word from John Bunyan

But one day as I was passing into the field, with some dashes on my conscience, fearing yet that all was not right, suddenly this sentence fell upon my soul, "Your righteousness is in heaven." I thought I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand. There was my righteousness. Wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me that I lacked His righteousness, for that was ever before Him. Moreover, I saw that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ Himself, "the same yesterday, today, and for ever".

"Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons, my temptations also fled away. From that time those dreadful Scriptures of God quit troubling me; now I went home rejoicing for the grace and love of God."

~John Bunyan in "Grace Abounding"