



Be Still.



THE BLIND PREACHER

George Matheson
Excerpts from his book *Voices of the Spirit*

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION

PRACTICALLY blind from the age of 18. A minister who lost his faith but continued preaching. A deep-thinking philosopher with the heart of a poet.

That was George Matheson (1842-1906) of Scotland, one of the premier preachers of the nineteenth century, but a man who today is best remembered for a single hymn.

*O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in Thee;
I give Thee back the life I owe,
That in Thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.*

Son of a shrewd Glasgow merchant, Matheson had received a quality education from his parents. He attended the University of Glasgow and hoped to become a lawyer. But his eyesight was worsening. For a while he wore thick lenses, and during college years he became virtually blind.

Like Job, he wrestled with the problem of

why he should suffer. He identified with Paul and prayed that his thorn in the flesh should be removed. But he found his answer when he identified with Christ. Jesus bore not only a thorn, but a crown of thorns; He conquered because He loved.

Years later he preached a sermon before Queen Victoria. His text was James 5:11; his topic "The Patience of Job." He concluded his message with these words: "Stand then where Job stood under the shadow of Gethsemane, side by side with the Son of man. Keep green your love with His love. For wherever love is, there is no despair . . . Love is the prophecy that the night is not eternal, and he that listens to love amid the cold hears already the song of the swallow that tells that summer is nigh."

Though he tried not to dwell upon it, undeniably his blindness was, in his words, "a cage." In reviewing his career, he called it "an obstructed life, a circumscribed life . . . a life which has beaten persistently

against the cage of circumstances," but a life "which even at the time of abandoned work has said not 'Good night,' but 'Good morning.'"

In other words, when beaten against the bars of his blindness, he was able to bounce to a new opportunity. Unable to become a lawyer, he became a preacher. Limited as a scholar, he acquired devotional depth and became a writer.

While the first major crisis of his life was his blindness, his second crisis could have been even more devastating. It came shortly after he was called to his first church. The new German scholarship led by Kant, Schliermacher and Hegel was challenging the Christian faith. Few of the British theologians were willing to confront the challenge, while younger ministers were being swept away by its persuasive rationalism.

Introduced to the German philosophers at college, young Matheson felt that if Christianity didn't have answers, he would

*"As the bread is broken and the wine is poured out, may we feel
that He is scarcely an absent Saviour, though unseen."*

"HE WAS KNOWN OF THEM IN BREAKING OF BREAD" LUKE 24:35

leave the ministry. As he re-read their works, he was shaken. He had just become a clergyman and then “with a great thrill of horror, I found myself an absolute atheist. I believed nothing, neither God nor immortality.” As his biographer relates, “His theological tabernacle was a mass of ruins.”

When he tendered his resignation, he was told to wait and not be hasty; his thinking might change. And gradually it did.

His brilliant mind interacted with the intellectualism of his day; frequently he became confused and unsure of some Christian doctrines. **But two realities kept him from wandering too far: the reality of God’s love as evidenced in the cross of Christ, and the reality of the Holy Spirit indwelling him.**

Hegel and Schliermacher left their mark on his ministry, but Matheson returned to orthodoxy. “I have changed,” he wrote later in life. “Without hypocrisy I preach all the old doctrines . . . but with deeper meaning.”

Another challenge facing the church was evolution. Matheson wrote books on this as well. He sought to show how evolution could be reconciled with Christianity. Once again he soon found himself engulfed by perplexities and contradictions, and abandoned his work in this area. Later, he repudiated evolution.

1882 seemed to be a crucial year for Matheson. Discouraged by the futility of his scholarship, by the instability of his own discipleship, and by the loneliness of his blindness, Matheson went through his personal Gethsemane. The evening of his sister’s wedding, as his personal loneliness loomed larger than ever, the words of the hymn, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go,” came to him. “It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life,” he recalled. “I had the impression rather of having it dictated to me by some inward voice than of working it out by myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes.”

It was also the year that Matheson began writing devotional books. *Voices of the Spirit*, published in 1888, was his third devotional book.

Through the years he developed a philosophy of devotional writing. He said, “A devotional book is believed to be a very simple thing. It ought to be the most difficult composition in the world, for it should aim at the marriage of qualities which are commonly supposed to be antagonistic—the insight of the thinker and the fervour of the worshipper.” He sought to avoid the twin dangers of devotional writing: “The danger of becoming formal, and lapsing into a ‘sleepy

routine’; and the danger of becoming artificial and of sinking into sentimentality.”

Thus, Matheson blended the skills of the thinker, the poet, the worshipper and the innovator in his devotional writing. In his hands, his biographer wrote, “Each text shines with a new face, speaks with a divine voice and utters the very word that the soul needed.”

In *Voices of the Spirit*, Matheson traces the references to the Holy Spirit from Genesis to Revelation and transforms what could be a dreary exercise into a delightful experience of worship and praise.

— WILLIAM PETERSEN

“I do not believe that moments of devotion are moments of mental vacancy; the wings on which the spirit soars must always be wings of thought.”

“The stream by which I have walked is the Bible. I have just walked beside the stream and taken my impressions from its windings.”

— GEORGE MATHESON

Some chapters from VOICES OF THE SPIRIT

THE HOPE OF THE SPIRIT

“My Spirit shall not always strive with man.”—GEN. 6:3

NO, not always; there shall be peace at the last. It is not possible that there can be two eternal powers; one must conquer and be all in all. **Shall it be the flesh or shall it be the Spirit?** The deluge shall answer that question. All flesh shall be destroyed; all carnality shall be drowned; all worldly lust shall be buried in the waves and love shall reign supreme. O glorious prophecy, you redeem the darkness of the flood. You are already the dove upon the water, but you tell of a higher rest than that of Ararat. You tell of a time when there shall be no more sea, no more passion, no more sin. You tell of summers without storm, mornings without cloud, moments without fear. You are better than the rainbow set for a covenant amid the waters. That only promised freedom from future punishment; but Yours is the pledge of a freedom from future sin. Your pledge shall be redeemed when “the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ.”

Spirit Divine, why is it that I am at war with You? We speak of the laws of nature and we do well. All nature is Your law and keeps Your law; this heart of mine has alone refused to say “Thy will be done.” I am myself the strange miracle of the universe, the violation of the order of nature. **I am the only thing in creation which strives with You, which needs to**

be reconciled to You. They say that to believe in You is to believe in that which contradicts reason; no, it is to find something which destroys the contradiction. I am *now* the contradiction to reason, the miracle in nature, the one exception to the reign of universal law. Spirit of Christ, Spirit of the heavenly Father, conquer my will; unite my purpose to Your purpose, that I may be in harmony with all things and that all things may work together for my good. Let me know for the first time the joy of being no anomaly in the universe of life, no interruption in the order of nature. All things shall be subject to You when I have ceased to strive.

THE PRACTICALNESS OF THE SPIRIT

“And Pharaoh said unto his servants, Can we find such a one as this is, a man in whom the Spirit of God is?”—GEN. 12:38

ONE would have thought the fact would have been a disqualification in the eyes of Pharaoh. Pharaoh was a worldling; how could he respect that which was unworldly? All his motives were guided by the interests of the hour, how could he welcome a man who belonged to the immensities and eternities? **It is because eternity includes the present hour,** and He who has the spirit of eternity has also the spirit of the time. Do you think that an atheist master would consent to have an atheist servant: No, he would know that the temporal work would not be well done. He who would do well the temporal work must be beyond the time. No man can steer his way through the ocean of life whose eye is not on the stars. Would you be fit for your service? Then you must be higher than your service. Life would be too much for you if you didn’t see ahead of it; you are saved by hope. You can’t be a man of the world without a balanced mind, and a balanced mind is a mind at peace. God’s peace is not something to die with; it is something to live by. Without it you are but half a man—unfit for Egypt, unfit for Pharaoh, unfit for the coming famine. *With* it, you are more a man of the time than those who call themselves abreast of the age; he who would be abreast of the age must already have outrun it, for the world that now is, is lighted by the world to come.

Spirit of Christ, fit me for the earth on which I dwell. I used to ask that You would prepare me for *death*; Your main province is to prepare me for life. I used to pray that You would make me ready for the things that are unseen and eternal; Your summer is the ripeness for the things that are seen and temporal. **I am growing more impressed with the solemnity of living than of dying.** I am growing more

impressed with the need of You in common things than in things transcendental. I am in want of You not to help me *out* of the world but to help me *in* the world. I need You both for the seven years of plenty and for the seven years of famine. Without You I can't bear either the one or the other. Be my pillar of cloud by day; be my pillar of fire by night. Teach me my nothingness in the hour of my prosperity; tell me in my adversity that I am something to You. Redeem from dust my evenings and my mornings alike, so I may claim as Your gifts not only unseen angels and principalities, but the world and life as well. The day of **common work** shall be the Lord's day, when I can say like the man of Patmos, "**I was in the Spirit.**"

THE MEDIUM OF THE SPIRIT

"The Lord came down in a cloud, and spake unto him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him, and gave it unto the seventy elders."—NUM. 11:25

GOD often speaks to me in a cloud—reveals Himself through that which seems an *absence* of revelation. The hour of sorrow becomes my hour of communion, and the silence of earth is vocal with songs of heaven. But the great advantage of my cloud is that it breaks my solitude. It seems beforehand to be a *source* of solitude. It threatens to be something which will hide me from the eyes of my brother man and drive me within the temple of my own soul. **In reality it has the opposite effect.** The message which comes to me through the cloud, comes to me as a message for humanity. It first clothes me in the spirit of peace, and then it takes the spirit it has put upon me and puts it on my fellow labourers. It enables me to feel that I have one common burden with those who work by my side. It tells me that I am never so little alone, never so near to the mass of mankind as under the shadow of the night. We do not all meet under the sunbeam, but we all meet under the cloud. **The cloud is the true conductor of the electric spark of love.** It carries my life into your life, my thought into your thought, my heart into your heart. It finds an entrance through the walls which prosperity has reared between man and man and unites the soul of David to the soul of Jonathan.

THE BEAUTY OF THE SPIRIT

"The pattern of all that he had by the Spirit, of the courts of the house of the Lord."—1 CHRON. 28:12

WHAT! Could the Spirit condescend to such a gift as that? Could it stoop so low as to inspire a man with the imagination of an architect? Why not? Is not the Spirit of God the spirit

of beauty? Why was there chaos before the Spirit moved if beauty be not a gift of the Spirit? Why, when the Spirit moved, did God say, "Let there be light," if the vision of material glory is alien to divine life? Don't say that matter is vile, don't say that beauty is sensuous, or that the forms of earth are the antithesis of the kingdom of God. There is a room within your heart which God has dedicated to the beautiful; you call it the imagination. Let the Spirit furnish that room. Let it say to this inner chamber, "Let there be light," "Let there be herb and plant and tree." Let it hang upon the walls forms too bright and fair to be ever seen below. So shall you know that your imagination had its birth in heaven, that the fountain of the stream of beauty has its home above.

Spirit of Christ, Spirit of the "altogether lovely," in You alone is realised my ideal of the beautiful. There are patterns hung up in my heart to which I can find nothing outside that answers. The light within my soul is a light that never shone on sea or land. All attempts to copy it are vain. There are spots in every sunbeam, crosses in every life. I have never seen the perfect landscape, never looked upon the faultless human soul. Never till I found *you*. You have answered to the pattern in my heart, realised the ideal in my spirit. You are the spotless sunbeam, the cloudless day, the faultless life. My imagination can't transcend You; **though I shut my eyes a hundred times, I can imagine nothing more beautiful.** In the vision of You I have received the fulfilment of my dream; You have realised my pattern for the courts of the house of the Lord.

THE MISSION OF THE SPIRIT

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; He hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted."—ISA. 61:1

A GREAT thinker has said that Christianity first taught man the reverence for things beneath him. It is profoundly true. The Spirit of Christ can say distinctively, "He hath sent *me* to bind the broken heart." It has come through other channels for other purposes, but through this channel it has had but one purpose. Sometimes its mission has been to teach me God's majesty, sometimes to reveal His beauty, sometimes to proclaim His law. But here in the heart of Jesus the mission of the Spirit is to show me a new exhibition of God's power—**His power of infinite stooping.** The divine majesty has ceased to dwell in the heavens; it has begun to bend downwards. It has refused to admit any longer that it is outside the world of suffering; if it be infinite it must include the cross as well as the crown. Men

have sought to honour it by denying it a home amid the sorrowful; it repudiates such a limit to its universal presence. It demands admission into lowly things. It claims access into the hearts and homes of the sad. It knocks at the door of the child-life. It asks an entrance into the struggles of youth. It solicits participation in the cares and toils of manhood. Its latest glory is the glory of incarnation; it empties itself.

Divine Spirit, I have found in the Son of Man a new test of Your presence. I used to see You by the vision of the eye, by the light of stars and systems, by the beauty of forest and field. Now I see You in the cross, in the tidings brought to the meek, in the binding of wounded hearts. I see You in my reverence for things beneath me, in my interest for pain, in my sympathy with tears. I see You in the charity that bears, believes, hopes, endures all things; in the love that seeks not her own; in the mercy that rejoices against judgment, in the forgiveness that welcomes even from the grave. These are the tests of Your presence. The heavens may tell of Your glory now in more broken accents than in the past, but the music has been taken up by loftier harps than theirs. It has passed into the hands of those who preach good tidings to the meek.

THE ELEVATION OF THE SPIRIT

"The elevation of the Spirit."—EZEK. 2:2

EXALTATION must precede revelation. I will not hear the words of Him Who speaks to me if my soul is grovelling in the dust. Before I can hear Him, the Spirit must set me on my feet, must cause me to stand upright, must impress me with the dignity of being a man. Consider, my soul, when is it that you hear most clearly the voice of duty? Is it not when you are most conscious of your own responsibility, most alive to your own deathless greatness? It is when you stand on your feet in the sense of immortality that you are most inspired by the message of revelation.

Before all things the Spirit must lift you up, raise you into the level of the sunbeams. It is in vain that the mirror exists in the room if it is lying on its face; the light cannot reach it until its face is upturned. So it is with my soul. **Heaven lies about me at all times. It is not enough that a place is prepared for me; I must be prepared for the place.** It is not enough that my light has come; I, as the prophet says, must arise and shine myself. No outward shining can reveal unless I am myself a reflector of its glory. Nature can't charm me if I am not already happy. Society can't delight me if I am not already social. Goodness can't gladden me if I am not already good. If I would see my Father running to meet me, I

must first say within myself, 'I will arise and go to my Father.' What my Father runs to meet is my separation, my want, my need. He comes to me because I can't live without Him, and the moment I feel that I can't, He waits until I am dissatisfied with the swine-husks, until I am weary of riotous living, until I have lifted my eyes out of the miry clay; and then He flies to greet me with the ring and the robe. When the Spirit has set me on my feet I shall hear the words of my Father.

THE SPIRIT'S GLORIFICATION OF CHRIST

"For the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified."—JOHN 7:39

HOW shall I know whether the Holy Ghost has been given to me? Is there any test by which I can judge of its presence or absence? The passage before us says that there is. It says that the Holy Ghost was not given "because Jesus was not glorified." The proof of the Spirit's absence is an unglorified Christ; the proof of its presence is a Christ who is honoured. My soul, have you considered this text of the Spirit within you? You are asking often anxiously for a sign of your union with the Spirit. Your outward life lags so far behind that it often seems to you as if God had passed you by. Yet in these words there is a mine of rich comfort for you. The first test of the Spirit is not the outward life but the inward ideal. The life may lag behind, but the ideal can run on before to herald its coming. Your test of God within you is the question, Is Jesus glorified? Is there hung up in your heart a picture of the sinless One? He may be far yet from the tread of your footsteps, but is His image in your soul? Have you in the great world of bustle and conflict moments of aspiration towards Him? Are there times in which His presence flits through your spirit and makes you glad? Are there seasons in which you say to yourself, "Oh, to be like Him! to be near Him! to be even in the smallest sense partaker of His holiness!" Then within your heart Jesus is already glorified. He may not yet be glorified in your word; our actions travel slower than our sentiments. But, if already He lives thus in your aspirations, He has had His coronation in your heart. The heart is the metropolis of His empire; crown Him there and you have ensured His dominion everywhere. Are you following him in *spirit*? Are you desiring Him, admiring Him, emulating Him? Are you making him an ideal which

you would like to hope for, to long for, to strive for? Then you *have* the test of the Spirit. You couldn't see Him as He is if you were not like Him. **If your pulse beats quicker at His presence, it is because His life is in you;** the Holy Ghost must have been given to you, because Jesus is glorified.

THE SPIRIT'S RECOGNITION OF CHRIST

"No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost."—1 COR. 12:3

THE thought is a beautiful one. Paul says that all worship is participation in that which we adore. And truly he is right. Worship is the homage of the heart, and the heart can only pay homage to that which is already in it. If I admire the beauties of Shakespeare I must myself be a Shakespeare to some degree—the light which shows him to be above me is his own light in me. I may never be able to write a line of poetry in my life, but if my heart has thrilled to Shakespeare's accents, if my soul has bowed down before the majesty of that which it instantaneously feels but could never have expressed, I have already the clear and certain evidence that the germ of the same genius sleeps in me.

My soul, do you desire to know whether the life that dwelt in Christ dwells in you? You need wait no longer for an answer. There is a test which is infallible.

Do you feel yourself to be poorer than before, meaner in your own eyes since He crossed your path? Then you already have His Spirit.

You are like Him because you see Him as He is—beautiful. If you weren't like Him, it would be impossible for you to see His beauty; you would only be able to look on His marred visage, His broken face. Now, you have bowed before a glory that is uncreated. You have recognised a kingdom amid the emblems of the dust. You have revered a lordship hidden in the form of a servant. You have detected a loveliness that concealed itself in the miry clay. So, you are like Him; you have the impression of His image in yourself, for that which you love is already half your own. No man can say that Christ is Lord but by participation of His own Spirit.

THE SPIRIT'S ABOLITION OF THE LAW

"Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."—2 COR. 3:17

WE say sometimes of a task we are learning, "I have not yet got into the *spirit* of it." We mean that it has not yet become easy to us. Nothing becomes easy to us until we have got into the spirit of it. The spirit of any study is its harmony with my spirit; it is the change of law into love. When I am a pupil at school I begin by learning rules, but when I have mastered the science I forget the rules. I forget them in the very act of observing them—keep them most perfectly when I am unconscious of their presence. I no longer think of my stops and intervals; these belonged to the days of law, but I am now under grace. The master-spirit of the musician has set me free—not free *from* the law, but free *in* it. I travel over the old scales and exercises, over the old stops and intervals, unconscious that they are still on the wayside. I pass unnoticed the places of my former pain; I go through undisturbed the scenes of my youth's perplexity, for the spirit of music has made me free, **and its law is most destroyed when it is most fulfilled.**

So, Thou divine Spirit, it is with Thee. Before I have entered into Thee it is a hard thing to be divine; it is all scales and exercises, the law of my members wars against the law of Thy mind. Until Thou comest I am not at home in the holy places; the presence of my God is not fullness of joy. I am too anxious about the counting of my stops and intervals; I am too eager about the measuring of my moral distances; I am too disturbed about myself and my remoteness from the goal. But when Thou comest I forget everything but Thee. I forget even my own humility, my own rags, my own nothingness; in the presence of Thy love I am burned up with unquenchable fire. Thy love is the music of my religion; it puts me in the spirit of it. I no longer need to learn the separate notes of duty; I can play by the ear; I can improvise. I no longer count the number of times I shall forgive; my every act of forgiveness is for eternity. I no longer ask, "Am I *commanded* to follow Thee?" I say, "Lord, allow me to go." I no longer cry, "I must come to Thee or go I shall to hell," but say, "It is hell without Thee; bid me that I come." Thou hast become my vital air; I breathe in Thee. Thy will is my joy; Thy work is my play; Thy law is my life; Thy service is my glory; Thy cross is my power; Thy command is my strength; the constraint of Thy love is my spirit's liberty.

In hour by hour living in fellowship I greatly fail, and yet I prize it above all things. I would fain work under an ever-open heaven, and say every hour with Stephen, "Behold, I see the heavens open, and the Son of man..." —ANDREW BONAR