

AN ALL-SURPASSING
FELLOWSHIP

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*Learning from Robert Murray M'Cheyne's
Communion with God*

David P. Beaty



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To
Beth, Anna, and Matthew



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Introduction



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.

—ROBERT MURRAY M'CHEYNE, *Memoir and
Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*

Robert Murray M'Cheyne died when he was only twenty-nine years old. His death ended his flourishing pastoral and evangelistic ministry only seven years after he began preaching in the Church of Scotland. But the brevity of his life and ministry stand in contrast to his enduring influence. Just one year after M'Cheyne's death in 1843, his closest friend, Andrew Bonar, completed the *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*. By 1910, approximately half a million copies of this record of M'Cheyne's life were in circulation around the world. Countless Christian leaders have been influenced by Bonar's account of his friend. Renowned preacher C. H. Spurgeon described the memoir as "one of the best and most profitable volumes ever published."¹ Theologian

1. Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (1844; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004), cover.

D. A. Carson has described M'Cheyne as one of the "Overlooked Shapers of Evangelicalism."²

M'Cheyne's influence did not come about because of the revival that shook both the church he pastored and his country of Scotland. Nor has it continued primarily because of his biblical, evangelistic sermons. Rather, M'Cheyne's enduring influence flows from the depth and vibrancy of his walk with God. His love for Jesus Christ overflowed in a life of holiness and humility that was evident to those who knew him or heard him preach. "He was the meekest, calmest, and holiest believer that ever I saw," wrote one who knew him.³ M'Cheyne's friend Robert Macdonald wrote:

Mr. McCheyne's holiness was noticeable even before he spoke a word; his appearance spoke for him. There was a minister in the north of Scotland with whom he spent a night. He was so marvelously struck by this about him, that when Mr. McCheyne left the room, he burst into tears and said, "O, that is the most Jesus-like man I ever saw." Robert McCheyne would sometimes say but one word, or quote a text; but it was blessed. I never got even a note from him that I could burn. There was always something in it worth keeping; God seemed to bless all he wrote.⁴

In his memoir of M'Cheyne, Bonar records a tribute written by a Mr. Hamilton of London. The tribute includes this observation of M'Cheyne's life: "A striking characteristic of his piety was absorbing love to the Lord Jesus. This was his ruling passion." Hamilton also wrote, "More than any one whom we have ever known, had he learned to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus."⁵

How did one so young attain such a depth of spiritual maturity and holiness in his few years on earth? Friends and biographers

2. David F. Haslam, "Robert Murray M'Cheyne (1813–1843), www.mcheyne.info/rmm.pdf, 1.

3. Alexander Smellie, *Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (1913; repr., Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus, 1995), 172.

4. Smellie, *Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, 174–75.

5. A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 172.

agree that the key to M'Cheyne's spiritual vitality and influence was his devotional life. M'Cheyne considered his communion with God to be "an all-surpassing fellowship" that was foundational to his life and ministry. Andrew Bonar wrote, "With him, the commencement of all labour invariably consisted in the preparation of his own soul. The forerunner of each day's visitations was a calm season of private devotion during morning hours."⁶ Bonar also records of M'Cheyne that "his heart was filled and his lips then spoke what he felt within his heart. He gave out not merely living water, but living water drawn at the springs that he himself had drunk of."⁷

Jesus described the work of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life by saying, "Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). The truth of Jesus' promise was seen in M'Cheyne's life to an exceptional degree. His close communion with God overflowed with much spiritual life for others. His time alone with God seemed to bring "rivers of living water" to many, as evidenced by M'Cheyne's effectiveness in evangelism and in the revival that came to his church.

As we examine M'Cheyne's communion with God, we will consider his prayer life, his Bible study, and his purposeful pursuit of holiness. We will observe his deep humility, and see its importance in his spiritual maturity. We will seek to understand the vital role of the Holy Spirit in M'Cheyne's walk with God. We will explore these things with a view toward application—to learn from M'Cheyne the attitudes and actions that can help us walk more closely with Christ.

The first section of this work will be an overview of M'Cheyne's life to help us get to know this remarkable Scottish pastor. The second section will focus specifically on his communion with God. In the final section, we will seek to learn from M'Cheyne lessons we can apply to our own lives.

6. A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 34–35.

7. A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains*, 40.

My prayer is that God will be glorified in this work by increasing our desire for close communion with Him. May He enable us to love Him with all of our hearts and all of our souls and all of our minds (Matt. 22:37). May He cause “rivers of living water” to flow from us to reach a thirsty world.