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A Trophy Of Sovereign Grace

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Compliments of:

Agape Chapel Ministries

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A TROPHY OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

By *John Kershaw (1792-1870)*

One of the greatest displays of the power and sovereign, discriminating grace of God that I have witnessed in the course of my ministry took place in the conversion of one of the inhabitants of the town (Rochdale), John Roby, who, when speaking of himself, like Paul before King Agrippa, often referred to his manner of life before his call by grace.

He was one of the most talented, learned men in the town, an author and a lecturer; he published his *Continental Tour*, *The Traditions of Lancashire*, and other works. His lectures upon botany and other sciences commanded great attention in our town, as well as in Manchester, Liverpool and Preston. At the time of his call by grace, he had engagements at all the above places, which his awakened conscience would not allow him to fulfil.

As a man of business, he stood high, being for more than twenty years partner and manager of the well-known bank of Fenton and Roby. As a professor of religion, he was the right-hand man of the vicar, a great advocate of the union of Church and State, and of rigid Conservative principles, and, like Saul of Tarsus, verily thought he was doing God service; but, to use his own words, he "had only a form of godliness, but knew nothing of the power," being filled with pride and self-importance.

One Monday, in the summer of 1844, he called upon me for the first time. I wondered what he could want, and begged of him to be seated, perceiving by his countenance that something of great importance was on his mind.

After a pause, he said, "Mr. Kershaw, I have called to have some conversation upon soul matters"; and, with tears in his eyes, he added, "I have such a feeling sight and sense of the depravity of my nature, the evils of my heart, the terrors of the Lord as an

angry God in His law, and am so assailed with the temptations of the devil that I have no rest day nor night.”

Every sentence as he spoke dropped into my soul, and filled my mind with wonder. In the course of my ministerial labours, many persons have come to speak to me upon soul matters, but none with which I was more surprised. I told him I was glad to hear what he had said, but was sorry that I had not time to enter into conversation with him, as I had to dine and get to the station by two o'clock to take a train for York on my way to Helmsley Blackmoor, where I was engaged to preach the word of life. He inquired when I should return. I replied, “On Friday afternoon, God willing.” He invited me to his house to tea on that day, and I consented to go.

The account he gave of the Lord's meeting with him is as follows. He had been with his family at the seaside on the Cheshire coast, opposite Liverpool. They went to one of the churches on a Lord's day morning, but he was in no wise pleased with the sermon, as it was not in so elegant a style of language as he liked. To use his own words, the preaching he liked best was excellence of speech of man's wisdom, the beauty of rhetoric, which pleases the ear of the learned and polite, who know neither themselves nor the Lord.

As they returned, he told his wife he should hear the man no more. She replied, “There is a beautiful new church a short distance from here, and I have heard they have a very clever man for their minister.” He was pleased with the thoughts of being better entertained in the evening.

They went in good time, and were much pleased with the beauty of its architecture. Being put into a pew which commanded a good view of the communion place, Mr. Roby began to admire the neatness of the gilt letters in the Lord's prayer and ten commandments. As he read the just and holy law of God, a light and a power from the Lord entered into his soul, such as he had never felt before. He could not refrain from bursting into tears. He saw himself, in the glass of God's law, by which in the hand of the Spirit is the knowledge of sin, to be a law-breaker, a transgressor, in thoughts, words and deeds. An awful terror and dread came upon him, and he sat and trembled, feeling himself arraigned at the bar of God in his conscience, and that the Lord would be just in his condemnation. He was so overwhelmed that neither the singing, the prayers nor the preaching had any effect upon his mind. He was in the state the Lord speaks of by the prophet Isaiah (66. 2): “But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word”; and he returned home with very different feelings from those he left with. I have often heard him say he was like Belshazzar the

king after he had seen the man's handwriting on the wall of the palace: "Tekel, thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting." His countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him; so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another, and it was with difficulty he reached home.

Pause, my reader, and think of what the Lord says in Psalm 110. 3: "Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy power"; for this was truly the day of the Lord's power in Mr. Roby's soul. What a fulfilment of that word of the Lord in Isaiah 2. 11: "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day."

He returned to Rochdale with a wounded spirit and heavy heart, which made him stoop. He could no longer associate with the gentlemen of the town and neighbourhood, only so far as business demanded. They were amazed to see him sunk so low, and feared he was going out of his mind. He could not find any comfort in the church; neither the prayers nor the sermons, however elegant the style, had any charms for him. The vicar expressed great surprise and sorrow at his leaving the church, but he had become a new creature. Old things had passed away, and all things had become new. The work of the Spirit in the conviction of sin by the law was very deep and powerful, as in Paul, who said, "I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Luther deeply felt the same; so did John Bunyan, William Huntington, William Gadsby, and many others who have been able ministers, not of the letter but of the Spirit.

Poor Roby was now like David, in the horrible pit and miry clay, shut up as in prison as one of God's elect crying day and night to the Lord for mercy. He was sorely tempted that he had sinned away the day of grace, or committed the unpardonable sin against the Holy Ghost, and that there was nothing for him but a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation which shall devour the adversary. In these deep waters of affliction he had no one to speak to who could give him a word of comfort or encouragement. His daily cry was:

"What shall I do, or whither flee,
To escape the vengeance due to me?"

Some of the clergymen with whom he had been familiar pitied him, and would have comforted him if they could; but as they had never felt either the condemnation or consolation, as Paul had, they could not comfort others with the same comfort wherewith they themselves had been comforted of God.

He thought of two or three persons in the town among the

passengers, several of considerable note, for Glasgow. The next morning, about break of day, the sea being calm, the vessel was run upon a rock. It split, and speedily sank. Many of the passengers were drowned, Mr. Roby being amongst the number. His wife and daughter, who were also in the vessel, were saved.

The same week I had been out preaching the gospel, and returning home by rail, a person who had been at Liverpool told me that news had come that the *Orion* was wrecked, and many lives lost. When I reached the station, a physician of our town said to me, "This is a sad calamity. Your friend Mr. Roby sailed in the vessel that is lost."

I trembled, fearing he might be one of those that were drowned, and I called at the bank to inquire. They said they could not tell me, but they had written to Liverpool to their agent for information and expected an answer in half an hour. I returned home, but could not rest in the house. I took a private walk, full of anxiety. On returning I was told that word had been sent from the bank that Mr Roby was amongst the drowned. What a blow was this to me, blighting all my expectations of his future usefulness to the church of God! How true is the Word of the Lord: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord" (Isa. 55. 8)!

Mr. Roby was half-brother to Mr. William Roby, Independent minister, of Manchester, of whom Mr. Warburton writes in his memoir that it was under his ministry he was brought out of bondage into gospel liberty. But Mr. John Roby was many years his junior.

This will in some measure account for what follows. When Mr. Roby the banker first came to Rochdale, he attended the Independent chapel, and had a family vault there; so that his body, when found, was brought to Rochdale and buried in his own vault. At the request of the widow, I delivered the address in the chapel to many who had come to show their last token of respect to his remains. Amongst them were several of the authorities of the town, who never before attended service in a dissenting place of worship, nor had heard my voice from a pulpit. As I surveyed the people, I thought of the following lines:

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform."

and prayed the Lord to assist me in speaking. My own friends said they never heard me speak with greater liberty nor solemnity.

The following Lord's day but one, I preached his funeral sermon from 1 Corinthians 15. 10: "By the grace of God, I am what I am," which gave me the opportunity of relating many of the things that I have been recording.

Dissenters who had long made a profession of religion, and he thought he would speak to them. He first went to an old deacon of the Independent church; but as this man had never had the fallow ground of his heart broken up by the plough of God's law, nor been held fast in prison and soul-bondage, he could not tell what to make of him, but feared he had been guilty of some great crime, which brought so much terror and dread into his soul. "But," said he, "let that be as it may, all you have to do is to believe in Jesus and you shall be saved."

The next person he went to was an old Scotsman, a deacon of a Baptist church, who told him all that he had to do was to take God at His Word, who had said, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God," and that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"; and if he believed that and called upon the name of the Lord, he would be saved. He replied that he had believed all this from a child, and had composed and published essays and odes upon the same; but such a faith did not give him deliverance from the trouble he was sinking under. In all this he was as "a barbarian" to the deacon, who had never felt the terrors of the Lord nor the liberty wherewith Christ makes His people free.

The third person he went to was a local preacher amongst the Wesleyans, who listened to his tale, which was like that of the prophet, who said, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips." But he also, being a stranger to such soul-exercises and the power of the Spirit in the work of faith in the soul, spoke as if faith was of himself, and told him if he did not believe to the saving of his soul, some heavy judgment would come upon him for his unbelief. All such advisers, instead of being a comfort, added to his distress and made him stagger like a drunken man at his wits' end.

After this, one evening returning home from the bank, greatly distressed, he found tea prepared for him but could not partake of it, for he felt as if his heart would burst, and he could not refrain from weeping. He told his wife he would take a walk into the fields. As he went along, he felt much oppressed and ready to sink, reasoning thus: "O Lord, I must be an out-of-the-way sinner! These three old men I have been to, who have been so long serving Thee, and from whom I had hoped to get some advice and comfort, do not appear to have such a wicked heart as mine, nor know anything about the wretchedness, condemnation and temptations that my poor soul is wading through. Surely I must be one of the vilest and chief sinners!" He often told me if the earth had opened and swallowed him up, he should not have been surprised.

Whilst thus overwhelmed with grief, it was as if he heard a voice, saying, "Go, open your mind to John Kershaw, of Hope Chapel. He knows and understands these things, and he will speak

words of comfort to you. Amazed, he turned round to see if any person was near, but saw no one. Whilst he thought upon this, it was as if the voice spoke the second time: "What did he say when you heard him preach?"

In giving me a relation of this, he said, "I had you presented to the eye of my mind as you stood in the pulpit and lifted up your hand and said, 'Friends, I will tell you how I felt in my own soul this last week. One morning, in family worship, I was much favoured with sweet communion with the Lord and nearness of access to Him at a throne of grace, feeling His sweet love shed abroad in my heart. It was indeed a time of refreshing. In the course of the morning I felt the Holy Spirit prompting me to go into my closet that I might have a little more sweet communion with the Lord. In a moment another feeling of opposition and rebellion rose up in my mind against it, which said, "Why pray so much?" O the horrid feelings that arose in my poor soul, against everything that is Godlike, which made my soul to tremble. This, my friends, is the inward conflict Paul speaks of in Galatians 5. 17: "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other; so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.'" As the Holy Spirit brought you and the things you then said to my remembrance, I said, "Dear Lord, this is like the bread cast upon the waters, seen after many days; for it is more than twenty years since I was in Hope Chapel, and heard Mr. Kershaw say these things."

According to the impression made upon his mind at this time, he called upon me as above stated, and that he fully realized the truth thereof will soon appear.

One evening, having been out upon my Master's business, on my return home I met with a gentleman I had long known as a fellow-townsmen, a professor of religion amongst the Independents, who said, "I am glad to see you, as I want to have a little conversation with you. I have been six weeks from home with my family in Wales, to see the beauty of the country. We returned home last week, and I went to the bank about my affairs. Having transacted my business, Mr. Roby said, 'You have got home again. How have you enjoyed your tour amongst the Welsh mountains?' I told him I was much pleased with the scenery and the beauties of creation and mentioned the principal places we had visited. He listened attentively to all I had to say, and replied, 'I have been to all the places you have named, and several others in Wales, and I have been through the Highlands of Scotland, and you know I have published my tour on the continent; in these things I have had great delight; but I can assure you that I now feel ten times more real pleasure in going up to Hope Chapel to John Kershaw's, and sitting at his feet to be taught by him the way of

the remission of his sins. Many precious portions of God's Word flowed into his soul, as streams from the river which gladdens the hearts of the citizens of Zion. His bodily health was improved so that he returned to Rochdale a new man in the feelings of his soul and in his bodily health. I well remember about this time preaching from Psalm 119. 103: "How sweet are Thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" After the sermon we sang:

"How sweet the name of Jesus sounds

In a believer's ear!

It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,

And drives away his fear."

After service, our deacon and leading singer said, "Mr. Roby, I never heard you sing so loud and so well before." He replied, "Thomas, the truths we have been hearing are the joy and rejoicing of my soul; and, feeling the power and sweetness of them, I have been singing with melody in my heart, giving thanks to the Lord."

With the joy of these things in exercise, he called upon me, and said, "I want you to go with me down to the bank, and two or three other places." When we got into the street, he requested me to take hold of his arm. I replied, "We can walk along and converse without that." But he urged me to do it, saying, "I have a reason for it, which is this. When I began to attend your ministry and keep your company, it was said by many that I was insane; but now they have altered their opinion, and say they never saw me looking better nor appear more cheerful; and I want them to see that my attachment to you and the truths you maintain is not abated now that they acknowledge I am in my right mind, and that I am not ashamed of you nor the doctrines you preach."

Soon after this he began to speak a little in the name of the Lord, and the last Sabbath he spent amongst us he preached in the afternoon to a crowded and attentive audience from Matthew 5. 4: "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted"; on which occasion he spoke as one that had tasted and handled the truth as recorded by the prophet Isaiah (61. 3): "To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

Many of his former acquaintances were present, and in the latter part of his discourse he gave an account of the Lord's bringing him amongst us, and of the spiritual benefit he had received under the preaching of the Word and Christian conversation.

In the month of June 1850, he made arrangements to spend some time in Edinburgh. The last letter I received from him was dated from Liverpool, June 18th. The Monday following he left Liverpool in a fine vessel called the *Orion*, with many other

which was so expressive of the feelings of his soul that in meditating upon it he composed a good tune, which we often sing to it.

Also the 51st Psalm; Gadsby's Selection, 76l:

"Show pity, Lord! O Lord, forgive!
Let a repenting rebel live.
Are not Thy mercies large and free?
May not a sinner trust in Thee?"

The whole of this hymn was so expressive of his soul-feelings that he composed a tune for it. I hope never to forget being with him at my friend Mr. Turner's, Hamer Hall, and seeing him play the piano and sing the above hymn to the tune he had composed for it with tears trickling down his cheeks. That noble and precious hymn of Dr. Ryland's:

"Sovereign Ruler of the skies,
Ever gracious, ever wise,"

was also a pre-eminent favourite with him; for which he likewise composed a tune, which was sung to it when I preached his funeral sermon. He greatly delighted in Mr. Hart's hymns, although he did not consider their style so sublime as Dr. Watts's; yet he used to say that he had read no hymns in which there was so much gospel truth expressed in so few words, in doctrine, experience and practice, as in Mr. Hart's. Many of Mr. Gadsby's own hymns were also much blessed to his soul, especially those upon the inward conflict between the flesh and the Spirit.

The deep exercises of his soul were such as tended greatly to impair his health, when his medical attendant told him that he had done all for him that his skill and medicine could do, and he recommended him to go to Malvern to try the cold water system practised there. Whilst at Malvern the Lord was graciously pleased to bring his soul out of bondage into the liberty of the gospel wherewith Christ makes His people free. The joy of his heart was as great as his distress had been before. Like David, who in the joy of his heart danced before the ark of the covenant of the God of Israel, his soul danced within him, whilst with the psalmist he sang as in Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits; who forgiveth all thine iniquities, who healeth all thy diseases," etc.

My spiritual reader will be ready to inquire as to the means of his deliverance. This was as follows. During the night, when sighing and groaning as he had been wont to do for so many months, the blessed Spirit, whose office it is to glorify Christ, was graciously pleased to apply the pardoning love and blood of Jesus to his soul, thereby giving him the knowledge of his salvation by

salvation, than in all I ever heard or saw before."

As my friend told me this, he turned towards me and stopped me in the road, adding, "I was never filled with so much surprise at anything that was ever spoken to me by any man as what he said on that occasion, and I have no doubt of the truth of it, for he spoke with such feeling and humility; and I consider it a great display of the power and grace of God. He will become a blessing to the town, and move in a different circle from that in which he has done hitherto."

This prediction was true; for he had to leave the church and become a regular hearer at Hope Chapel. When this was sounded abroad, several gentlemen came to the chapel to see if it really was so.

Mr. Roby now began to keep different company. He had formerly visited at the vicarage, but now he became a frequent visitor at Hope Chapel house. Our agreement was to have our tea at each other's house weekly, which gave us the opportunity of having much spiritual conversation, reading and prayer. When he spoke of coming to Hope Chapel twenty years before, I remembered it, and where he sat.

Being once in conversation on this subject at a friend's house, he said, "I was a little too soon at the chapel, and opened a hymn book that was in the pew, and saw that Mr. Gadsby had altered one of Dr. Watts's hymns, and I felt offended that such a man as Gadsby should attempt to correct Dr. Watts." The hymn referred to is the seventh in the First Book of Dr. Watts, and Hymn 56 in Gadsby's Selection:

"Let every mortal ear attend,
And every heart rejoice."

Mr. Gadsby has rendered it:

"Let every open ear attend,
And broken heart rejoice."

"But," said Mr. Roby, "since the Lord has been graciously pleased to open my heart and ears, I see great beauty and propriety in the alteration; for I am persuaded that no poor sinner can joyfully hear the gospel's joyful sound till God does open his heart and ears, and give him to see and feel his need of it."

Mr. Roby was favoured with a poetical gift and an ear for music, and composed some good tunes. On one occasion, when in great distress of soul during the night, the following lines were brought to his remembrance:

"When overwhelmed with grief,
My heart within me dies;
Helpless, and far from all relief,
To heaven I lift mine eyes";