MY LIFE STORY
and
BIBLE TALKS

by

E. A. DODSON.

2/6 *(As a donation towards the Pennygate Mission Building Fund)*

Pastor E. A. Dodson.

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Private Address :

"Omega," 331, Pennygate, Spalding, Lincs.

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PART I

A BRIEF SKETCH OF THE LIFE, EXPERIENCE, AND WORK OF PASTOR E. A. DODSON

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

It has been suggested by some dear friends that I should write my life story. Sometimes when preaching I have mentioned some trial or remarkable answer to prayer, and friends have said, "You ought to write it and print it; it might help someone." I am no literary man or composer, but what I write is of real life and experience, and my only desire is that what I write may be a blessing to those who read it.

In my seventy-third year many experiences of my childhood days still gleam with fragrant sweet memories. My saintly parents, how keenly they watched over our moral and spiritual interests. How their prayers surrounded us and followed us. How they could tell by watching our faces. If all was well or if we carried a guilty conscience, mother would say, "Come here my boy. What's wrong? Tell me." It was never easy to face mother when we had done something we ought not.

I can still hear my strict but splendid father saying on Saturdays, "Now you boys, get those mangel-wursels cleaned and ground up. You know to-morrow is Sunday. Get the pig food mixed." Yes, get ready for Sunday in the yard, and in the home it was the same. Sunday was indeed the Lord's Day in the home and on the farm to us all.

On Sunday we were all up early and dressed in our Sunday best. The Family Bible was in front of father, and he read and prayed for us and also the services we were attending for the day. Sometimes we had to read in turn. I was a poor reader, and often made mistakes, but after one reading I remember father saying, "God bless the boy, he reads with all his heart," and mother replied, "Yes. God bless him. I pray that one day he will preach the Gospel."

In those days we lived at Waterbeach in Cambridgeshire, and used to drive seven miles to Oakington Baptist

Chapel. The Minister was named John Parish, a tall dark man, with keen black eyes, and oh, how still and solemn were the services. I scarce dare move, but sometimes during the singing of a hymn I would look round, and there would be a chapel full at 10.30 a.m. Oh, those sacred past Lord's Days! I pray they may yet come back.

I remember once seeing mother cry in the service and when we got home I said, "Mother, why did you cry in chapel this morning?" "Oh, my boy," she said, "I cried because I was glad, not because I was sad. I know that God loves me, and it made me cry because I feel so unworthy of such love."

As a boy I was very fond of reading, with a book I was always happy. I remember reading the life story of John Newton, the hymn writer, and to read quietly I went to my bedroom and I came to the words:

"In evil long, I took delight
Unawed by shame or fear,
Till a new object met my sight
And stopped my wild career.
I saw One hanging on a Tree
In agony and blood;
He fixed His languid eyes on me,
As near His Cross I stood.
Sure, never till my latest breath
Shall I forget that look.
It seemed to charge me with His death,
Though not a word He spoke.
Another look He gave, which said,
I freely all forgive,
This blood is for thy ransom paid.
I died, that thou might live."

Just then, mother opened my bedroom door and found me sobbing with tears. "Whatever's the matter, boy? Aren't you well? Why do you cry?" Then I showed her the verses, which told her I too was crying because I was glad, not because I was sad. Yes, there was a fragrance in those early days which still lives and bears fruit.

When aged about ten years we left Waterbeach and came to Burwell, Cambs., where we had a small farm. Here we used to attend the small strict Baptist Chapel

at Swaffam Prior. My father was never a preacher, but he used to pray and give out the hymns, and there was what was called a table pew with a music-stand on the table, around which about ten men gathered to start and lead the singing. Oh, the sweetness and power of that singing still lives with me, all taking their separate parts, and I have seen that congregation moved to tears many times as my father read the verses of the hymns and spoke a few words.

I left school at the age of twelve and not being fond of farm work I took a situation as house boy in Cambridge with board and lodging, and five shillings a week. Undergraduates were lodged at this home, and I had to be up at 6 o'clock, clean five stoves, shake all the rugs and mats, clean cutlery and boots and be ready for breakfast at 8 o'clock. After breakfast I did a newspaper round through the colleges. Years afterwards when asked, Here, what college did you attend?" I always had an answer, "Cambridge. I am a Cambridge man because as a boy I took a news round to all the colleges."

After staying a few months at Cambridge, I returned home to Burwell and became errand boy at the Burwell Co-operative Society. Here I had five shillings a week, working hard, and delivering to all parts of the two-mile long village. I stayed and learned the trade, and at the age of twenty married on fourteen shillings a week, but in those days what a contrast to prices to-day. Tea 1/6 lb., sugar 1½d. lb., flour 1/- stone, coal 1/- cwt, bacon 4½d. to 6d. per lb., rent 2/- a week. Those were hard times, but then we learned to measure the value of every penny. "Beer and tobacco," we never troubled about, because food stood first.

Now I have told you enough on that side, let me turn to the side of my Christian life and conversion. After some months' illness I was advised by the doctor to leave my trade and get out into the open air. I had for a long time been troubled about my soul's salvation, and God opened the way for me to go to Newmarket and take charge of a granary for a Newmarket corn merchant. Here I started at 18/- a week, and stayed nearly twelve years, by which time my wages were 26/- a week. I had for years been under deep conviction of sin, but could never see nor understand the way of salvation. I had for years listened to the doctrine of election,

nntil I felt I wasn't in it, nor ever could be. Then one day my neighbour said, " Mr. Dodson, we have a Men's Class Meeting at Granby Street Primitive Methodist Chapel on Friday evenings, will you come? " and I went, and found the minister and about twelve men gathered for prayer and Christian experience. One by one these men got on their feet and told us their troubles and joys, but I was deeply affected by the assurance of definite salvation they seemed to have. Many of them seemed to enjoy what I had been longing for for several years.

Then the minister turned to me and said, " My young brother, have you anything you would like to say? " So I rose, trembling like a leaf, to my feet. " Yes," I said, " I know I'm a sinner, and need salvation, but I feel I'm out of it, and that God won't have me, and I have felt like that for some years," and I sat down in tears.

Then the minister rose and said, " My dear young brother, God bless you. Those whom God designs to do some great and gracious work for Him He sometimes leads through deep waters. It may be because God wants to use your experience to help others. Pray on, my dear young brother. It will not be long before light and blessing will break through to your soul."

I think it was the next day in walking home to dinner, about a mile each way, I was musing over the chorus, " I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me, that on the Cross He shed His Blood from sin to set me free." Something seemed to say, " You don't believe that Jesus died for you. If you did you would be glad, not miserable as you are." " Oh, God," I cried, " It's true, I don't believe." Then something seemed to say, " Well, why not believe now, and done with it," and at ten minutes past one, a few hundred yards from my home on Exning Road, Newmarket, a light shone from Heaven into my soul, and I looked up and said, " My dearest Lord, I do believe that Jesus died for me, and also by His death I am from sin set free. Hallelujah." And at that moment I found that conversion is both a life and an experience, and that the words of that old hymn are blessedly true :

" And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood.

Died He for me, who caused Him pain,
For me, who Him to death pursued ?
Amazing love, how can it be
That thou my God shouldst die for me ?
Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin, and nature's night.
Thine eye diffused one quickening ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light ;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee."

There are one or two lessons that I learned in Newmarket that I would pass on. One lesson is that betting on racehorses lowers the moral strength of those who engage in it. One race week we took in three boarders who promised to call and pay us for board and lodging on the Friday after the races were over. They never came, and never paid.

Another lesson is : A man told me how his wife had gone house-cleaning to earn money to pay the rent with. She gave her hard-earned money to him to pay the rent, and he put it on a racehorse instead.

In contrast with this, I was on the market on a Tuesday, which is market day, and a poor old man with both legs off and one arm injured was turning the handle of a small portable music box and singing a song :

" Down in the coal mines, underneath the ground,
Digging the dusty diamonds all the season round."

An injured miner thus earning a living. People were throwing in their pence, and I threw in what I thought was a penny, and suddenly the old man stopped, and looked up, and said, " Sir, did you think you gave me a penny ? " " Yes," I said. He said, " It's a two-shilling piece. Take it back and give me a penny." " No, my friend," I said, " you keep it. Your honesty is worth that, and more." But I have never forgotten that honest crippled old man. He has lived in my memory through all the last forty-eight years.

After my conversion I became a Local Preacher on the Newmarket and Wickhambrook Circuit. I well remember my first attempt to speak in public. It was near my home ; neighbours and workmates gathered round after one or two others had spoken. The minister said, " Now, our young brother Dodson will speak." I gave out my text, but not another word would come

In shame I hid my face behind the people. But I did not give up. I went to the camp meetings at Hargrave, Ousden and Wickhambrook. I remember I had just started speaking from the wagon on Hargrave Green when there came a flash of lightning and a thunder roll, and off ran the gathered crowd like frightened rabbits, leaving me shouting away. As they ran anyone might have thought I was frightening them away.

At Ousden the Camp Meeting was held at the Five Elms, five old beautiful elm trees on a little raised green with some public houses near, and as we started the afternoon service the pubs closed, and out came the folk to our Camp Meeting, smoking their pipes and some with bottles of beer sticking out of their pockets. I happened to sit in the wagon, where I could see the faces of these people. They were indeed out for a lark. Out would come a bottle of beer for a sip, and then a broad smile would go round ; the speakers in front of me were having a hard time, and my turn was soon to come. If only I could have dropped out of the wagon and flerd I would have done so, but I stayed on, and prayed hand for strength to do God's will, whatever the cost and to matter how hard the task, and after another hymn the leader announced me as the next speaker. I stood up and all fear fled as I gave out my text :

" In this was manifested the Love of God toward us. Because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

" Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

As I spoke I became conscious of a Greater Power winging my words with life and conviction. Tears came in the place of sneers, and the pipes and bottles disappeared, and the people pressed nearer, and nearer to the wagon as if drawn by some spiritual power. Thus I became conscious of God calling me to preach the Gospel at an old-fashioned Primitive Methodist Camp Meeting.

I felt a deep longing for the Ministry, but being married and having three children no opening appeared.

I felt tired of Newmarket and having a knowledge of grocery and drapery I was offered the management of a village shop and business six miles from Newmarket.

I took it as if it were God's guidance, accepted it and decided to settle down.

But as soon as we moved in I was much disturbed by these words, "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." The words constantly tormented me, and I had no rest, and after six weeks I gave up the business and moved into a little cottage in the same village, and prayed for God to show the way for me; the words "Be not unequally yoked" came no more, and my mind was at rest, and within a few days I received a letter from a friend at Isleham, nine miles from where we lived. My friend was a converted cobbler, and had lived near us at Newmarket, but went to Isleham and joined Pound Lane Baptist Chapel. It was the occasion of New Year's week of prayer, and he wrote and asked me to come on the Monday and speak and sing for him, as he was not very well. Having no work or business to prevent me, I went. The meeting was in the school room; about twenty people were there. I sang and spoke, and at the close of the meeting the Deacon appointed for the Tuesday came and asked me to take his service and the same happened each evening until Friday, when the minister asked me to come on Sunday and speak and sing. On the Sunday the village people came and filled the chapel and the minister came and said, "We must keep on. You must come. God is working, do come."

And so I continued preaching the Gospel. From the first Monday in January that year to Easter Monday scores were saved by Grace. There were two wonderful baptismal services in the River Lark at Isleham Ferry, a mile lower down than Jude's Ferry, where C. H. Spurgeon was baptised. It was wonderful, and indeed how God had met my every need! I had a wife and children at home, and I was out of work. On the second Friday I was at Isleham. After breakfast I went upstairs to pray for a token from God. Was I to stay and preach, or go home and work? and as I was praying the token was coming along. When I came downstairs a knock came at the door and a girl of about twelve years stood there and said, "Is Mr. Dodson here please?" I said, "My name is Dodson." "Oh," she said, "Mrs. Fuller Chapman has sent this." I took the note and thanked her. Inside was two half-crowns and a sheet

of paper with three words, "From a Friend." God had evidently sent what I had prayed for because He wanted me to keep on, and every week for more than three months there was sent to my lodgings money, meat, butter, eggs, cake in abundance. Oh, what love those Isleham people showed in their love to our Lord and myself.

I finished my mission work there on the Easter Monday, but before I left a Miss Robins sent for me. She was a bedridden invalid lady. She said, "I have sent for you, Mr. Dodson, to thank you for being the instrument in God's hands for answering my prayers. I have been ill for over two years, and have spent my time praying for the people of Isleham, and I thank God for sending you to bring blessing and salvation to this village." That was the secret behind the Isleham revival—"a praying woman."

After the Isleham revival I made my way to seek work at two large roller flour mills at Mildenhall, four miles east of Isleham. I was shown up to the office of the general manager. "No," he said, "I am sorry, but we have no vacancies. But who are you?" "Oh," I said, "my name is Dodson." He replied, "You don't happen to be the same Dodson who has been preaching at Isleham?" "Yes," I said. "I am the man." He pulled out his watch and said, "It's my lunch time. Will you come home with me to lunch?" So I went with him to lunch, and was introduced to his wife and family, "all girls." I thought they took a curious interest in me. After lunch we sat by the fire while the manager dozed. But suddenly arousing he said, "Do you know the Barton Mills Baptist Chapel?" "Yes," I said. "I cycled past the other day and got off at the rusty old gate and looked through at the chapel and graveyard. I noticed the place looked desolate, and sadly out of repair." "Well," he said, "I am the only living trustee, and a strange thing has happened. Squire Tubbs of Herringswell Hall is buried there, and about six weeks ago I had a letter from two of his daughters in Devonshire enclosing a cheque for ten pounds to pay for putting their father's grave in repair. I went up to see and found the whole place needed repair inside and outside, so I set to work, and collected from my market customers at Ely, Cambridge, and Bury St.

Edmunds, about one hundred and twenty pounds, and I have had everything put in good order. Here's the key, go and preach the Gospel, and I will find you what work you need at the mill." I thanked him, took the keys, and went up to Barton Mills Chapel, which was about one mile from Mildenhall.

I found lodgings with an elderly widow named Mrs. Mendham, and when I explained that I had come to preach the Gospel in the Baptist Chapel she said, " Praise the Lord for that, it's been closed seven years."

After six week's mission work there was a public re-opening of the chapel, and about four hundred were present at the reopening.

I stayed at Barton Mills two years, working four days a week at the mill, and taking the oversight of the chapel and school, and, thank God, the place has never been closed again after thirty-five years' absence.

After two years I received a call to preach one Sunday at Jehovah Jireh Chapel, Lakenheath, Suffolk. The chapel was known as a Calvinistic Independent. Daniel Smart, a great preacher, had been its pastor for fourteen years, but he had left some years before, and the place had fallen into a low state.

I was invited to take the pastorate and offered £60 a year as salary, but to be responsible for my own rent. I accepted the call and took a small empty house previously occupied by the village blacksmith, who was kicked as he was shoeing a horse, and made such a trouble of it that he hung himself in his house, and then got the credit of haunting it, and it was known as the " Haunted House."

The work at the chapel revived, and I have seen on Sunday evenings the gallery full, and people sitting on the gallery and pulpit steps for seats. But £60 a year and a family, the last of whom were twins—six children in all! There came a time when I owed £15 in rent and had not 15/- to pay it with. I got very depressed, and one Saturday afternoon I threw down my Bible and said, " I won't preach again, I'll do something else for a living."

I went out for a walk up on the Brandon Road, as miserable as sin, and stood under a fir tree near what is called " The Shepherd's House," and I heard someone talking, so I looked up the road toward Lakenheath,

and saw a man coming down the hill talking to himself. "Oh," I thought, "you have been to the pub and got a drop too much," but when he got to where I stood he stopped and said, "Excuse me, is this the way to Thetford?" "Yes," I said. "Is it far?" he asked. "It's twelve miles from Lakenheath," I answered. "Oh dear," he said, "I've walked from Sheffield seeking work. I'm an engineer by trade and I've heard of Burrells' the engineers of Thetford, and I'm making my way there, but I'm done up. I've walked from Ely to-day—fourteen miles." I 'put my hand in my pocket and took out half-a-crown. 'Here," I said, "Take this, go on four miles to Brandon, and get some food and lodging and go on to-morrow." Then he surprised me. He put the half-a-crown in his cap and laid it on the roadside and knelt down and thanked God for hearing his prayer. When he got up he said, "Mister, did you hear me talking coming down that hill?" I said, "Yes. I thought you had had a drop too much." "No," he said. "I've no food nor money to buy any, and I was asking God to send me help. I don't know who you are, and I may never see you again, but I do know God sent you here to help me to-day. God bless you, sir! Good day!"

I went home, took up my Bible and started to prepare for Sunday. That Sunday morning a lady came to the service with her daughter, and on the Monday this lady sent for me. I was asked into the drawing-room and she asked me to take a seat. "I have sent for you," she said, "because I want to tell you something. I have been to hear you preach the Gospel many times, and your ministry has done me more good than anything in all my long life" (she was nearly eighty) "and," she said, "I want to do a little in return for the blessing you have been to me," and she passed me a sealed envelope and when I reached home I found inside a cheque for fifty pounds.

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

Well, the First Great World War came upon us, and everything went up in price, and I took a storekeeper's job at Shippea Hill for a time, and while there I was asked to preach one Sunday at Westrow Baptist Chapel near Mildenhall. I went. In the congregation that

Sunday was a man from Pinchbeck, L ncolnshire. I had no idea he was there, nor who he was, but he had gone for that week-end to see his mother, and he was a member and deacon of Pinchbeck Baptist Chapel, and at a church meeting soon after his return he suggested that I should be asked to come and preach with a view to the pastorate. So I went. I shall never forget that first visit to Lincolnshire. I thought the train I got in at Ely came through to Spalding, but when I got to March I found the train went on to Peterborough, so I got out and the train went on. "Where do you want to go?" said a porter. "Spalding," I said. "Well, you won't get to Spalding to-night," he said. "The train has been gone a quarter hour ago." Then he pulled himself up. "No," he said, "it's still there. Run, you may catch it." I ran across and up the middle platform, where the train was standing. "Where for?" said the guard. "Spalding," I said. "Jump in," he said. As I took my seat I heard the brakes go off. He put his head in the open window and said, "That's the strangest thing I have known in all my years on the railway. We've had those blessed brakes on a quarter of an hour and could not move the blessed train. Now you have come the blessed brakes have gone off on their own account!"

And so I reached Spalding and Pinchbeck to preach with a view to the pastorate. After a time I received an invitation to the pastorate. It was couched in honest terms: the Cause was low, the collections about twelve to fifteen shillings a Sunday, but I could have occupation of the manse, and the fruit of the garden and any balance after incidental expenses were paid, and they had no objection to my working on the land part-time if I so wished; but in the same week I had an invitation to take a clothier's traveller's place at Hitchin, at £160 a year and commission, a sum that seemed a fortune compared with Pinchbeck's offer. Well, I felt drawn to Pinchbeck, and accepted in spite of plenty of criticism on the part of my friends and again God confirmed my decision. The daughter of the lady at Lakenheath sent me £10 to pay our travelling expenses, one of the members, a Pinchbeck lady, ordered a ton of coal to be put in the shed ready for us. We arrived in early August and sold seventy stones of

Victoria plums, we had a splendid harvest thanksgiving and in a word all our needs were met in a wonderful way, thank God.

We spent a few happy years at Pinchbeck, and shall not forget the kindness of the people and the loyalty of my little band of teachers and workers—God bless them all. But sorrow, sooner or later, makes its way into all homes, and war is a fruitful cause. Our eldest son Wilfred was discharged in the First World War as unfit for military service. His health improved for a time and being interested in road transport work he bought a Daimler lorry on hire-purchase agreement, and started a business for himself. He worked hard and business so increased that he added other lorries. He married a splendid Christian girl from Grimsby, a good accountant who helped him with book-keeping and accounts, then after about a year of happy married life his health gave way and after about a year of serious illness he died at the age of twenty-six years. During his illness I helped to keep things going, and on account of hire-purchase agreements on the lorries we decided to carry on the business at his request after his death.

In order that it may help some readers I will write of his death. I had been to take the week evening service at the Northgate Chapel, West Pinchbeck, and after supper went up to his bedroom, and was greeted with " Hullo, Dad, did you have a nice time at the service ? Were there many people there ? " I said, " Yes, I had a nice time, and there were about sixty people there." Then he was quiet a few minutes, and then said, " Dad, open the window." " Why, Wilfred ? " I said. " It's rather a cold night, why do you want the window open ? "

" Well," he said, " I'm going out there soon." " What makes you say that ? " I said, and he answered, " Well, Dad, about this time last night either Jesus or it might have been an angel, came in at that window and said, ' I'm fetching you to-morrow night about this time. Be ready.' Yes, Dad, I want to be ready, open the window." So I opened the window. Then he said, " Dad, sing something," so as best as I could I started to sing :

" How sweet the name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear."

Wilfred started with me, beating time with one hand, then when I got to the words

" He makes the wounded spirit whole,
He calms the troubled breast,
Is manna to the hungry soul
And to the weary rest "

his hand dropped and his voice faded out, and he was gone. Never in my life have I had more convincing proof of the immortality of the soul of a believer than the glorious triumphant death of my eldest son at the age of twenty-six years.

Well, to draw a long story to a close we carried on the business and in time other members of the family were worked in, and after a period of years of hard work my own health gave way and I was told by the doctor to take things steady and rest, or I would not live long, and I thought well, if I've only a few more years to live I would rather live and preach the Gospel the rest of my days than to be just a business man, so again I prayed for God to open the way and the answer to my prayer is Pennygate Mission Church, and as soon as its doors were opened, my health improved, and the business increased, so that up to now, 1947, all our needs have been wonderfully supplied.

" Praise ye the Lord, 'tis good to raise
Your hearts and voices in His praise."

E. A. Dodson.