

Mercies of a Covenant God.

John Warburton, Minister of the Gospel, Trowbridge.

By Les Yates.



I have in my possession an old copy of the life and ministry of John Warburton. John Warburton was born in 1776 in Whitefield, about five miles from Manchester. I have an interest in John Warburton as I was born just a few miles from his birthplace and his early preaching ministry. The book is entitled 'Mercies of a Covenant God' and it is a book that I often turn to for spiritual nourishment and encouragement. A further reason for appreciating the biography of John Warburton is his humble origins and conversion experiences, especially his experience of conviction of sin, these experiences in a much smaller measure I can joyfully relate to. The gospel, accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, produces the same result in whatever age and in whatever circumstances.

J.C. Philpot writes a thorough and detailed preface at the beginning of John Warburton's book. J.C. Philpot himself makes interesting reading. He had been a minister in the Church of England, and fellow of a College at Oxford trying to serve a church in Stadhampton and maintain a connection with the University. Disappointment and a long and trying illness deepened his sense of his own sinfulness which resulted in a re-assessment of his life and future. About this time John Warburton came to preach for a Mr. Tiptaft in a chapel in Abington. J.C. Philpot was a friend of Mr. Tiptaft and in the providence of God just happened to be in the congregation at the time. Referring to the occasion J.C. Philpot writes: *'I afterwards learned that the poor dear man, having heard that I was a man of great learning, was almost as much afraid of meeting the Oxford scholar as the Oxford scholar was of meeting him. But how much better grounded were my fears than his! And how much his grace outshone my learning!'*

God's early dealings with John Warburton.

John Warburton's parents were very poor which meant that John received very little in the way of education. He did, however, obtain a little reading and writing skills in his childhood, a blessing for which he often felt thankful. His early experiences of God's gracious influences came through seeing his mother sighing, groaning and weeping when reading her Bible. From the age of eight up to the age of fifteen he experienced much conviction regarding his lying and swearing. On entering adulthood, and marriage, John Warburton was still unsaved and spent most of his leisure time in public houses, gambling and drinking.

The Light begins to Dawn.

The opening of a new church containing a fine organ in Bolton drew John Warburton to the church service. He intended to spend a few shillings in the public houses on the way home, a distance of about six miles. Speaking of his encounter on hearing God's word he writes: *When the minister began to read the prayers I thought I had never heard them read in like manner before. But when he got into the pulpit and read his text, it came from his mouth into my heart like a two-edged sword. His text was, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." I verily believed that he pointed directly at me; for his eyes appeared to look right through me, and I thought I should have dropped into hell. All my sins and iniquities from a child stared me in the face, and I trembled like a leaf.....On my way home, the moment I got into the fields where no human eye could see, and no human ear could hear me, I fell on my knees, and with all my power of body and soul cried, "God be merciful to me, a sinner."*

This experience, however, was only the beginning of a very rocky road to true redemption and salvation. John Warburton recounts the many lapses into sin, frequenting of public houses and card playing. On one occasion he was passing a chapel in Cannon Street, Manchester, but delayed going in for fear of hearing a text quoted during a recent sermon he had heard, the text was, 'Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them.' Plucking up courage and entering the chapel he writes: *'when seated in the chapel all the horrors of hell seemed to come upon me. I trembled from head to foot, and wished that I had never come in.'* The text, however, was Psalm 68:18 "Thou has ascended on high, thou hast lead captivity captive; Thou hast received gifts for men; yea, for the rebellious also, that the Lord might dwell among them.' John's

joyful response, and relief was to burst into grateful praise: *'O the love, peace and joy that broke into my heart as the words came out of his mouth! They were truly sweeter to my soul than ten thousands of gold and silver.'*

From Scepticism to Conversion.

John Warburton recalls that the first moving of his soul to preach and enter the ministry was when he was baptized by William Gadsby, of Manchester. John's record of his first encounter with Gadsby, and hearing him preach, is quite an eye opener and a lesson for us all in avoiding prejudicial thoughts when sitting under the sound of God's word, John writes: *'I think I shall never forget the first time that I heard him. When I got into the chapel I thought to myself, what a poor, gloomy, miserable place this is! And as the people came in, I felt such a hatred rise up in my heart against them as I never felt against any people before. Nay, so much so, that I was just ready to take up my hat and walk out, when Mr. Gadsby got into the pulpit. I was struck with surprise to see so poor and mean-looking a fellow (as I thought him) attempt to preach. I despised him in my very soul, and thought he looked like an ignorant fool that had no common sense. He rose and gave out a hymn, but it was in so drawling a way that I verily believed he could not read. O how the devil rose in my heart! I even wished that someone or other would raise a disturbance in the chapel, for I thought I could kick him out of it with all the pleasure in the world. My prejudice was so strong that, when he went to prayer, I do believe that I actually hated his voice. He appeared to stutter and stammer as though he could hardly get a word out of his mouth. My soul boiled with rage, and I called myself a thousand fools for coming to hear such a fool.....The words of his text were, "A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things; and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things;" And he was so long in reading them, that I dropped my head down and thought I would try to go to sleep.'* Gadsby went on to describe the twofold state of humanity. He first explained that by nature no man was good, and then went on to say how man could be good in Christ. John continues: *My very soul was knit to him, as closely as Jonathan's and David, and my ears were nailed to the doorpost. I had never heard my ins and outs, my ups and downs, my days and nights, my sorrows and joys, so opened up before. Had he been in my very soul, he could not have opened it up more plainly. From that day I attended the Baptist Chapel, and O the heavenly times I had when Mr. Gadsby was supplying.'* Gadsby became minister of the chapel later and had the joy of baptizing and mentoring a very grateful redeemed sinner.

A fruitful and lasting legacy.

The glowing testimonies of many regarding the life and preaching of John Warburton are both encouraging and uplifting. The grace of God changed a semi-illiterate and complex sinner into a godly and gracious man and a channel of God's wonderful grace. Through his ministry many were saved and built up in their most holy faith. Philpot writes: *'The generation that heard the truth from his lips with that unction, sweetness and savour which so specially attended it will pass away. A few scattered sermons may remain, which were taken down as they fell from his lips, but these will indeed furnish a most inadequate idea of the special power which attended his delivery....His desire was, as a Christian, to experience the sweet inflowings of the love of God to his soul; and as a minister, to debase the sinner, exalt the Saviour, and trace out the work of the Holy Ghost in the heart, from a feeling, living and daily experience of it in his own conscience.'*

John Warburton lived in challenging times, especially in trying to put bread on the table for his wife and many children. Returning to the preface of J.C. Philpot he writes: *'It is a living experience of the trials and afflictions of forty years, written in the most simple, feeling and savoury way-not with wisdom of words, but in the very language of the heart itself. And not only is it a simple record of troubles and sorrows, trials and temptations, but it contains most marked and striking deliverances in the very hour of darkness and distress, when hope seemed well-nigh gone, and faith at its last gasp.'*

The crowning testimony of the life John Warburton was in the way he was able to depart from this world enjoying the presence and power of his dear Lord. Though suffering the ravages of disease, he never lost the assurance of God's love and his own salvation. The last chapter is an account of a glorious and triumphant departure.

The real purpose of writing this article is to encourage Christians, young and old, who feel inadequate and limited in their ability to serve the Lord. Converts who come from a humble, disadvantaged, secular and irreligious background can take heart from the life and ministry of John Warburton. God has promised to 'restore to you the years that the swarming locusts have eaten.' If God can do it with a John Warburton he can do it with anyone. Trust Him!