

ROBERT --- CHAPMAN

A Biography By
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Robert Chapman
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Scripture quotations in this book
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Verses marked NASB are taken from the
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1 A Glimpse at a Long Life

The old man held the arm of his walking companion as they made their way through the streets of Barnstaple on their daily walk. His short steps held little hint of the rapid gait and long strides of his earlier years when he had traversed the countryside of southwest England. “Mornin’, Mr. Chapman,” was a common greeting from the townspeople who met him. Robert Cleaver Chapman followed their greeting with a warm acknowledgment and often a portion of Scripture.

For seventy years he pastored in the hamlets and villages surrounding Barnstaple. With patience and gentleness he was a servant to those he led. “My business is to love others and not to seek that others shall love me” were words remembered by one of the many missionaries he had influenced.

The word *love*, which so clings to any account of Chapman’s life, refers to an attitude of caring, a giving of himself that marked his long life. He understood the

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concept of Christian love as few others have. His life illustrated Christ's new commandment that we "love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34, NASB); it was the very heartbeat of true Christianity.

Robert Chapman became one of the most respected Christians of nineteenth-century Britain. He was a lifelong friend and mentor to George Müller, the founder of the large orphanage system at Bristol. He was an adviser to J. Hudson Taylor, who used him as a referee for China Inland Mission. His acquaintance C. H. Spurgeon called him "the saintliest man I ever knew." An Anglican clergyman wrote after a stay at Chapman's rest home, "For the first time I heard Robert Chapman expound the Scriptures. Deep called to deep as he warmed to his subject. The impression made on my mind is almost all that I can remember, as I took no notes; but as his Bible closed I felt like an infant in the knowledge of God, compared with a giant like this."

A brilliant man from a wealthy family, Chapman could have chosen any number of prestigious paths to follow. Yet he chose a life of poverty. He wanted to work and live with poor and uneducated people. By seeing Christ's love in a person who loved them, they could more readily believe the gospel message.

As we trace Chapman's life, we see first a precocious child, then a teenager searching for and yet judging God. In his teens he was sent to London to become a lawyer, and there he met his Lord. After his conversion he was disciplined by a preacher who had broken from the Church of England. Chapman developed a strong concern for the welfare of the dwellers in the slums of London—the same slums of which Charles Dickens wrote a few years later. Invited to pastor a troubled church in a small town, he abandoned a modest fortune, his profession, and all possibilities of advancement to spend the rest of his life in an obscure corner of England.

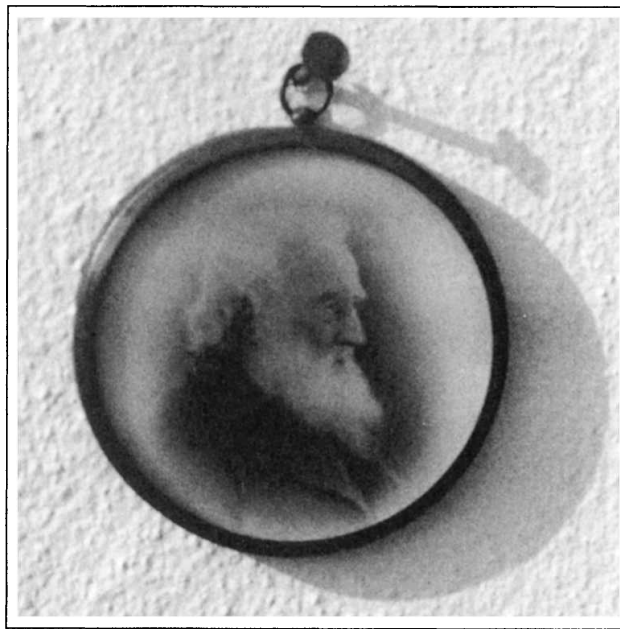
We see him struggle with a small group of immature Christians, bringing them to maturity through love and example. He found himself in the midst of a growing religious movement made up of many men and women with

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convictions similar to his own. Later he watched with grief as a portion of this movement turned inward and moved away from its initial love and openness. He was not strong enough to stop the wrenching apart, but as one of the few who were respected by many on both sides of the split, he was called upon to heal hurting souls and repair damaged congregations.

He became a missionary to missionaries. His home became a retreat for tired and discouraged Christian workers. He counseled and encouraged, always on the basis of the Scriptures he loved.

Robert Chapman was not a noted orator, but he became a good preacher; he was not known as a theologian, but he was a thorough student of the Bible; he was not famous as a hymn writer, but many of his hymns are still sung. What then made Chapman so beloved and effective in his time? Quite simply, his utter devotion to Christ and his determination to *live* Christ. These were the driving forces in his life. From these flowed his other attributes, his balanced outlook, and most of all the love for which he was best known. In return, people loved him and God honored him with good health, a long life, and inward peace.

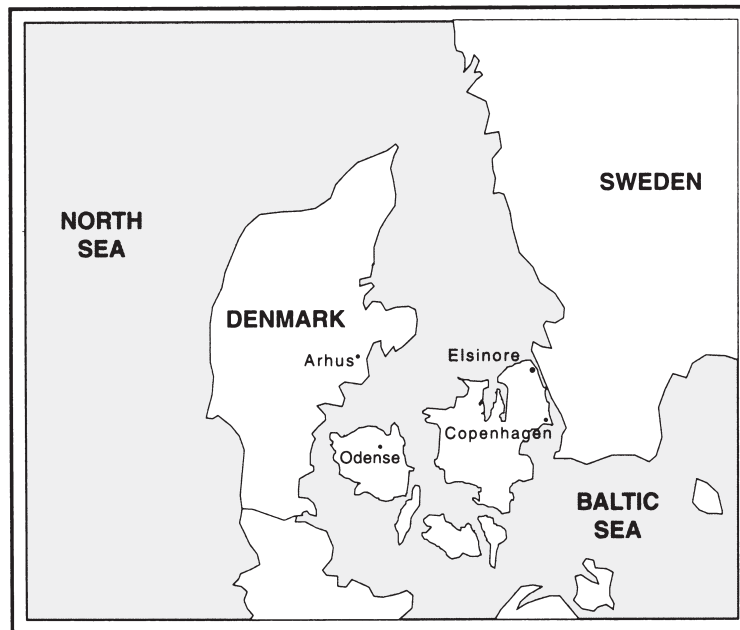


One of the few photos taken of R.C. Chapman.



The Chapman family roots can be found in the area around Whitby, England.

The home of Robert Chapman's heart was Barnstaple.



Although of English descent, Robert C. Chapman was born in Elsinore, Denmark.

2

Robert Grows Up

Those who knew Robert Chapman only as an adult were always surprised to learn that he had been born into a wealthy family. The Chapmans had been one of the dominant families in the area around Whitby, North Yorkshire, for many generations. They had taken their livelihood from the sea and the sea had brought them wealth and power. Though some had left for other pursuits, none had followed the path that Robert Cleaver Chapman would take.

Born on January 4, 1803, Robert was the sixth of ten children. At the time of his birth his parents, Thomas and Ann, lived in Elsinore (now Helsingor), Denmark, where his father ran a prosperous merchandising business (probably that of importing and exporting goods). The family lived in a large, exquisitely furnished home. A staff of servants catered to their needs, and a stable of horses and a coach bearing the family coat of arms were reminders of life back in Yorkshire—the center of the Chapman

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family interests. (See appendix A for more details of the Chapman family history.)

Ann, the mother of all these children, seems to have been strong-willed and intellectual. She taught all her children until they were nine or ten years old. Since tutors no doubt could have taught many subjects to the children, it is likely that Ann wanted to instill her love of literature and learning into a branch of the family in which money and possessions were of great importance.

If events had gone according to expectations, Robert Chapman would have entered adulthood as a gentleman, not having to earn a living. He could have devoted himself entirely to intellectual pursuits, the fine arts, or other tasks generally undertaken or overseen by the upper classes, as many of his forebears had done. God, however, had other plans for him.

Robert, a precocious child, often said that he wanted to become a poet. That desire revealed itself later in his hymn writing and in the style of his prose. He read constantly and was considered by many in his family to be far too bookish. When he was about ten years old, his parents secured a Roman Catholic priest from France to tutor him, probably in languages and literature. The tutor seems to have been a worthy instructor, if we can judge by the results. The fact that Robert's parents were willing to expose him to a Roman Catholic priest for one or two years is good evidence that they had no strong convictions about any particular branch of Christianity. Perhaps the priest discussed religion with his student, because when Robert left home at fifteen, he had a strong desire to find out what the Bible said. Although religion seems not to have been paramount in his immediate family, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Quaker attitudes all influenced Robert's early life.

Robert was devoted to his mother and later said that when he was very young he cared little for anyone else as long as she was near him. Perhaps his mother favored him. She confided to a friend, "Robert always has a passion, whether literature or the flute, and whatever he takes up, he pursues diligently." Other Chapmans castigated the studious youngster, saying, "Robert is such a philosopher.

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He won't do much." It would have been impossible for him not to be affected by such declarations of inadequacy. No doubt they caused him to draw even closer to his mother and into his books, away from the family's material interests.

His diligence, earnestness, and passion to enter thoroughly into topics that interested him did not leave as he grew up. The maturing youth demonstrated remarkable ability in languages; he studied a language until he mastered it. English, Danish, and French came to him naturally because they were spoken in the Thomas Chapman household. Robert also became proficient in German and Italian, probably with his tutor's help. After his conversion to Christ he studied Hebrew and Greek so he could read the Bible in those languages. When he became interested in doing missionary work in Spain, he studied Spanish and Portuguese until he could speak them fluently.

Ann Chapman's hope that her love of literature would be passed on to her son was realized. During Robert's adult years his acquaintances often remarked on his great literary knowledge, even though he received no formal education in literature after his fifteenth birthday. Italian literature was a favorite of his. As an adult he rendered this beautiful free translation of a sonnet by Michelangelo, the great Italian painter and sculptor:

My life, a voyage o'er a tempestuous sea
In a frail bark, draws near the common end
Of all men. I, as others, must descend
Into the grave. What profit now to me
Pencil or chisel? Where the gain to be
In highest art a monarch? Can I bend
God's sin-avenging justice to befriend
My helpless soul that would of guilt be free?
Nor saints nor angels can my ransom give
From the two deaths that are before mine eyes—
The first at hand: the twain my righteous doom—
But on the cross, the sinner to receive,
God's Son spread out His hands. He hears my cries;
To Him I look and triumph o'er the tomb.

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A CHANGE IN CIRCUMSTANCES

When Robert reached his early teens, his father's business faltered during the Napoleonic wars in which Denmark sided with France. As a result of his conflict with Britain, Napoleon ordered all the ports under his control to close their markets to Britain. Whether or not this decree directly caused the Chapman business failure is not known. Whatever the cause, Thomas Chapman lost a great deal of money and was forced to relinquish his business. The future in Denmark looked bleak for the family, so Thomas and Ann moved back to Yorkshire. Although Thomas was not impoverished, his family could no longer maintain its former standard of living. This fact played a decisive role in Robert's life.

Enrolled in a Yorkshire preparatory school, Robert demonstrated his gift for languages and his love of literature. Still wanting to become a poet, he dreamed of devoting his life to books, writing, and scholarly achievement. However the family fortunes were now only a fraction of what they had been, so Robert would have to give up his gentleman's life and earn his living. He showed little interest in the sea and none in merchandising. Enrollment in Oxford or Cambridge would have been a natural course for him, and he apparently could have been admitted. The family was well-connected and the Thomas Chapmans seem to have re-established their link with the Church of England, a prerequisite for admission at that time. Perhaps the family's previous Quaker connections were an obstacle. More likely the larger Chapman family preferred that he enter the legal profession instead of pursuing academic interests.

In any event Robert left home at age fifteen and traveled to London in 1818 to begin a five-year apprenticeship with an attorney. Leaving home at an early age to learn a trade or profession was not rare at that time. Robert was intellectually mature beyond his years and probably quite ready to leave home. Other Chapmans lived in and around London, so he would not be completely isolated from his family.

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If he was disappointed with this career choice, it is not apparent. He plunged into his apprenticeship with characteristic enthusiasm and determined to become an independent attorney. Part of his training consisted of copying legal documents, a task that must have been especially tedious for him. Studying legal precedents, court cases, procedures, and all the other details required of a good lawyer occupied his time not only at the office but also in his room during the evenings. As a youth he had “slept with Homer under my pillow,” but no longer could he spend long and enjoyable hours with his beloved Italian classics.

Perhaps it is not too surprising that spiritual concerns also began to occupy Robert’s mind. He needed to know where he stood before God and he began to read and study the Bible. During the next few years he read it through three or four times even though he questioned its authenticity. Much later he wrote that he was regarded during those years as a blameless, religious, and devout young man. “Long before I was quickened by the Spirit of God, I was considered a very godly young man, and I took to reading the Bible to see if it was a true book.” From friends and libraries he borrowed books written by religious skeptics, but he found them generally unsatisfactory.

In spite of required legal study and growing religious concerns, Robert had a reasonably active social life. By his late teens he had grown tall and had a deep, resonant voice. Family connections opened many doors for him. On weekends and holidays he often attended parties in London’s fashionable West End. Witty and articulate, he had become popular. But his confident manner and engaging smile hid an uneasiness, an unrest of spirit. His pleasant social activities seemed empty. Years later he wrote, “Sick was I of the world, hating it as vexation of spirit, while yet I was unable and unwilling to cast it out.”

God’s Holy Spirit and the Bible would not let him go. He read and reread the Bible, judged it, tried to refuse its judgment of himself, and tried to put it aside. The Bible was speaking to his heart, but he found many of its truths confusing and difficult to understand: God’s love and

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wrath, His rejection of sin and His invitation to man to enter into communion with Himself. Chapman did not want to give up his pleasant life for an uncertain call. "I hugged my chains. I would not—could not—hear the voice of Jesus....My cup was bitter with my guilt and the fruit of my doings." He was acutely aware of his great problems in attempting to establish his righteousness in God's eyes. Outwardly happy and at ease, the sensitive young man was in turmoil.

After his five years of legal apprenticeship Chapman became an attorney of the Court of Common Pleas and an attorney of the Court of the King's Bench. Three years after that, at age twenty-three, he inherited a small fortune and set up his own law practice on Throgmorton Street in the banking center of London. He was successful from the beginning. Older lawyers praised and encouraged him. A brilliant future in law lay ahead.