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Joseph Priestley

Excerpt

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M E M O I R S
OF
DR. JOSEPH PRIESTLEY.

[WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.]

HAVING thought it right to leave behind me some account of my *friends* and *benefactors*, it is in a manner necessary that I also give some account of *myself*; and as the like has been done by many persons, and for reasons which posterity has approved, I make no farther apology for following their example. If my writings in general have been useful to my cotemporaries, I hope that this account of myself will not be without its use to those who may come after me, and especially in promoting virtue and piety, which I hope I may say it has been my care to practice myself, as it has been my business to inculcate them upon others.

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My father, Jonas Priestley, was the youngest son of Joseph Priestley, a maker and dresser of woollen cloth. His first wife, my mother, was the only child of Joseph Swift, a farmer at Shafton, a village about six miles south east of Wakefield. By this wife he had six children, four sons and two daughters. I, the oldest, was born on the thirteenth of March, old style 1733, at Fieldhead about six miles south west of Leeds in Yorkshire. My mother dying in 1740, my father married again in 1745, and by his second wife had three daughters.

My mother having children so fast, I was very soon committed to the care of her father, and with him I continued with little interruption till my mother's death,

It is but little that I can recollect of my mother. I remember, however, that she was careful to teach me the Assembly's Catechism, and to give me the best instructions the little time that I was at home. Once in particular, when I was playing with a pin, she asked me where I got it; and on telling her that I found it at my uncle's, who lived very near to my father, and where I had been playing with my cousins, she made me carry it back again; no
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doubt to impress my mind, as it could not fail to do, with a clear idea of the distinction of property, and of the importance of attending to it. She died in the hard winter of 1739, not long after being delivered of my youngest brother ; and having dreamed a little before her death that she was in a delightful place, which she particularly described, and imagined to be heaven, the last words she spake, as my aunt informed me, were “ Let me go to that fine “ place.”

On the death of my mother I was taken home, my brothers taking my place, and was sent to school in the neighbourhood. But being without a mother, and my father incumbered with a large family, a sister of my fathers, in the year 1742, relieved him of all care of me, by taking me entirely to herself, and considering me as her child, having none of her own. From this time she was truly a parent to me till her death in 1764.

My aunt was married to a Mr. Keighly, a man who had distinguished himself for his zeal for religion and for his public spirit. He was also a man of considerable property, and dying soon after I went to them, left the greatest part of his fortune to my aunt for

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life, and much of it at her disposal after her death.

By this truly pious and excellent woman, who knew no other use of wealth, or of talents of any kind, than to do good, and who never spared herself for this purpose, I was sent to several schools in the neighbourhood, especially to a large free school, under the care of a clergyman, Mr. Hague, under whom, at the age of twelve or fifteen, I first began to make any progress in the Latin Tongue, and acquired the elements of Greek. But about the same time that I began to learn Greek at this public school, I learned Hebrew on holidays of the dissenting minister of the place, Mr Kirkby, and upon the removal of Mr. Hague from the free school, Mr. Kirkby opening a school of his own, I was wholly under his care. With this instruction I had acquired a pretty good knowledge of the learned languages at the age of sixteen. But from this time Mr. Kirkby's increasing infirmities obliged him to relinquish his school, and beginning to be of a weakly consumptive habit, so that it was not thought adviseable to send me to any other place of education, I was left to conduct my studies as well as I could till

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till I went to the academy at Daventry in the year 1752.

From the time I discovered any fondness for books my aunt entertained hopes of my being a minister, and I readily entered into her views. But my ill health obliged me to turn my thoughts another way, and with a view to trade, I learned the modern languages, French, Italian, and High Dutch without a master; and in the first and last of them I translated, and wrote letters, for an uncle of mine who was a merchant, and who intended to put me into a counting house in Lisbon. A house was actually engaged to receive me there, and every thing was nearly ready for my undertaking the voyage. But getting better health my former destination for the ministry was resumed, and I was sent to Daventry, to study under Mr. Ashworth, afterwards Dr. Ashworth.

Looking back, as I often do, upon this period of my life, I see the greatest reason to be thankful to God for the pious care of my parents and friends, in giving me religious instruction. My mother was a woman of exemplary piety, and my father also had a strong sense of religion, praying with his family morning and evening, and carefully teaching his chil-

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dren and servants the Assembly's Catechism, which was all the system of which he had any knowledge. In the latter part of his life he became very fond of Mr. Whitfield's writings, and other works of a similar kind, having been brought up in the principles of Calvinism, and adopting them, but without ever giving much attention to matters of speculation, and entertaining no bigotted aversion to those who differed from him on the subject.

The same was the case with my excellent aunt, she was truly Calvinistic in principle, but was far from confining salvation to those who thought as she did on religious subjects. Being left in good circumstances, her home was the resort of all the dissenting ministers in the neighbourhood without distinction, and those who were the most obnoxious on account of their heresy were almost as welcome to her, if she thought them honest and good men, (which she was not unwilling to do) as any others.

The most heretical ministers in the neighbourhood were Mr. Graham of Halifax, and Mr. Walker of Leeds, but they were frequently my Aunt's guests. With the former of these my intimacy grew with my years, but chiefly after I became a preacher. We kept

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kept up a correspondence to the last, thinking alike on most subjects. To him I dedicated my *Disquisitions on Matter and Spirit*, and when he died, he left me his manuscripts, his Polyglot bible, and two hundred pounds. Besides being a rational christian, he was an excellent classical scholar, and wrote Latin with great facility and elegance. He frequently wrote to me in that language.

Thus I was brought up with sentiments of piety, but without bigotry, and having from my earliest years given much attention to the subject of religion, I was as much confirmed as I well could be in the principles of Calvinism, all the books that came in my way having that tendency.

The weakness of my constitution, which often led me to think that I should not be long lived, contributed to give my mind a still more serious turn, and having read many books of *experiences*, and in consequence believing that a *new birth* produced by the immediate agency of the Spirit of God, was necessary to salvation, and not being able to satisfy myself that I *had* experienced any thing of the kind, I felt occasionally such distress of mind as it is not in my power to describe, and which I still look back

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upon with horror. Notwithstanding I had nothing very material to reproach myself with, I often concluded that God had forsaken me, and that mine was like the case of Francis Spira, to whom, as he imagined, repentance and salvation were denied. In that state of mind I remember reading the account of the man in the iron cage in the Pilgrim's Progress with the greatest perturbation.

I imagine that even these conflicts of mind were not without their use, as they led me to think habitually of God and a future state. And though my feelings were then, no doubt, too full of terror, what remained of them was a deep reverence for divine things, and in time a pleasing satisfaction which can never be effaced, and I hope, was strengthened as I have advanced in life, and acquired more rational notions of religion. The remembrance, however, of what I sometimes felt in that state of ignorance and darkness gives me a peculiar sense of the value of rational principles of religion, and of which I can give but an imperfect description to others.

As *truth*, we cannot doubt, must have an advantage over *error*, we may conclude that the want of these

these peculiar feelings is compensated by something of greater value, which arises to others from always having seen things in a just and pleasing light; from having always considered the Supreme Being as the kind parent of all his offspring. This, however, not having been my case, I cannot be so good a judge of the effects of it. At all events, we ought always to inculcate just views of things, assuring ourselves that *proper feelings and right conduct* will be the consequence of them.

In the latter part of the interval between my leaving the grammar school and going to the academy, which was something more than two years, I attended two days in the week upon Mr. Haggerstone, a dissenting minister in the neighbourhood, who had been educated under Mr. Maclaurin. Of him I learned Geometry, Algebra and various branches of Mathematics, theoretical and practical. And at the same time I read, but with little assistance from him, Gravesend's Elements of Natural Philosophy, Watt's Logic, Locke's Essay on the Human Understanding, &c, and made such a proficiency in other branches of learning, that when I was admitted at the academy (which was on Coward's foundation) I was ex-
cused

cused all the studies of the first year, and a great part of those of the second.

In the same interval I spent the latter part of every week with Mr. Thomas, a baptist minister now of Bristol but then of Gildersome, a village about four miles from Leeds, who had had no learned education. Him I instructed in Hebrew, and by that means made myself a considerable proficient in that language. At the same time I learned Chaldee and Syriac, and just began to read Arabic. Upon the whole, going to the academy later than is usual, and being thereby better furnished, I was qualified to appear there with greater advantage.

Before I went from home I was very desirous of being admitted a communicant in the congregation which I had always attended, and the old minister, as well as my Aunt, were as desirous of it as myself, but the elders of the Church, who had the government of it, refused me, because, when they interrogated me on the subject of the *sin of Adam*, I appeared not to be quite orthodox, not thinking that all the human race (supposing them not to have any sin of their own) were liable to the wrath of God, and the pains of hell for ever, on account of that