

A Biography of John Sung, Flame for God in the Far East, by Leslie Lyall, China Inland Mission, London, UK, 1956. (27 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. God Determines Times of Revival

Other students have detected in the timing of revivals a certain arbitrariness, suggesting that the sovereign Lord brings revival not just when the Church is pleased to desire it but when He is pleased to give it. [page x]

2. Great Sacrifices to Follow the Lord

[John Denney states] “There must be great renunciations if there are to be great Christian careers.” [page x]

3. Remember the Glory of the Resurrection

Easter, 1930, came around. John Sung had been back in China for two and a half years. All this time he had been engaged in constant travel and had worked very hard indeed. He now had two children, a girl and a baby boy. As a volunteer worker, he had been receiving no regular salary, and it had been difficult to make ends meet. He and Ms. Sung had to think twice before making the smallest expenditure of money. It was little wonder that sometimes the Tempter suggested to John’s mind the thought that all this time he could have been earning a handsome salary from the Government. Why, then, in serving the Lord, was his reward so meager? This temptation assailed him afresh one day in Passion Week. But as he thought of His Lord going all the way to the Cross, he seemed to hear Him say, “Cannot you obey Me to the full? Cannot you surrender your all to Me? I know all about your cares. Remember that after the shame and pain of the Cross there comes the glory of the Resurrection! Be patient a while longer and all will be well!” [pages 52-53]

4. Dr. Sung’s Messages for China

One of the missionaries wrote in the summer of 1931: “We are having a Bible revival in Nanchang and Kiukiang ...Dr. Sung can take any Bible passage you suggest and make it live as I have heard almost no man do. He still spends hours daily in the Book, and that is the secret of his success.” John Sung himself was confirmed even more clearly in his own mind that his was to be a message to the churches of China which would expose sin and declare God’s remedy for it in the Cross. He felt commissioned to emphasize the uselessness of an empty religious profession without an experience of new life in Christ through the new birth. [page 64]

5. The Chinese Need Jesus Christ

But not everyone was in sympathy. One of the missionaries in this city told Dr. Sung that he did not believe in the Second Coming of Christ, that the Old Testament was

unreliable and that he objected to talk about the Blood of Christ and the Holy Spirit. Not knowing Dr. Sung's history, he asked him one day what his opinion was about science and religion. Dr. Sung's reply was: "Science is good, but it cannot save people from their sins!" And when the missionary suggested that the highest type of Christian was represented by men like Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick and Mahatma Ghandi, Dr. Sung's response was: "China does not need the teaching of Fosdick or Ghandi. The teaching of Confucius is better far than theirs. What the Chinese need is Jesus Christ and the Cross. People talk about Fosdick, but what do they know about him? I have studied under him and I rejected his teachings utterly and finally." At the service which followed, Dr. Sung preached Calvary, and over 100 stayed to pray and to pledge themselves to take up the Cross and to follow Christ. What better illustration of his thesis than this could there have been! [page 69]

6. Prayer for the Work of Evangelical Bands

As a result of the Summer Conference, the Bethel Band had agreed to emphasize in all their campaigns four important features of a healthy church life: the Watch-tower or prayer meeting; Evangelistic Bands, composed of new converts and others; Bible classes for effective follow-up work; and the institution of family worship in the home. The influence of Dr. Sung's experience in Fukien and Central China is plain. A "Watch-tower" was set up in a room at Bethel where every day from early morning until late at night someone was always at prayer for the work of the several Evangelistic Bands. [page 73]

7. The Chinese Church to Be Self-supporting

One of things that saddened Dr. Sung was that the missionaries had used the threat of the withdrawal of funds to the church if they did not withdraw their invitation to the Bethel Band. This led Dr. Sung to write in his journal: "Beloved fellow workers and fellow Christians! Why do you still depend on the financial support of foreigners? You should look to the Lord of all things and realize that the time has come for the church to be self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting—truly independent. [page 77]

8. Working Until Exhaustion

Dr. Sung daily went over his message with Frank Ling, his interpreter, however often he may have preached a similar sermon before. By the time the evening meeting was over John was so completely exhausted that he would fling himself on the bed to rest. As Mrs. Deming used to see the weary form lying there the Scripture came to her mind: "This is my body which is broken for you." John Sung was already living up to the limit of his strength and, like his Lord, pouring out his life for God and His hungering children. He was never long free from pain from the old wound left by the operation on

his back in America and the pain always returned when he was overtired or upset. But like Paul, he regarded this as his “torn in the flesh” and was able to glory in his own weakness. “Were it not for this”, he once wrote, “it would have been impossible to restrain my proud disposition.” But after a rest John used to kneel up at the dining room table, under a good light, and in fine, beautiful Chinese characters write up his journal. Wherever he went, this was an essential part of his daily routine. [page 81-82]

9. “The Chicken Preacher”

John was not an easy guest to entertain and lacked all the social graces. Among other things, he invariably ordered chicken prepared in the Chinese fashion in rich chicken soup at least once a day. This earned him the nickname of “the chicken preacher”! But Mr. Ling explains: “If you ever attended his meetings and seen how he preaches, often three times a day and as long as two hours at a time, exerting every ounce of his physical and nervous energy from beginning to end, you could not blame him for asking for chicken soup to sustain him. Without special nourishment, he could never have kept up his strenuous work.” [page 82]

10. God Provided What Sung Needed

The weather was by this time getting very cold and John had insufficient warm clothing. So he “laid hold” of God’s promises and asked for a skin-lined gown such as is worn in the north in the winter. Within a very short time, one of the Christians gave him the very thing he asked for! [page 86]

11. Asking for Forgiveness of a Mother’s Prayer

One praying mother had an atheist son who had been to America three times in the course of his education. This man hated his mother for praying for him and had even contemplated murdering her. When he was invited to the meetings by a friend he consented to go, “just to see that madman Sung jumping around the platform”! But he came under deep conviction of sin and knelt where he was to make his confession to God. The he went over to the side of the church, where the women, in Chinese tradition, were segregated, and sought out his mother. With a trembling voice he asked her forgiveness and she sobbed aloud as she praised God for answering her prayers of long years. [page 93]

12. Baptized Before Baptizing Others

The Band now returned to Canton for meetings in the Baptist Church, led by Andrew Gih, who later went on to Swatow. The rest of the Band returned to Hong Kong on April 26th for a second enthusiastic campaign, which continued until May 1st. On that day a very large crowd attended the Peniel Mission Church for a baptismal service, in which Dr. Sung had invited to take part.

“But I have never been baptized by immersion myself!” he objected. Then he added that if Mr. Reiton would baptize him first, he would baptize the others. So the Rev. A. K. Reiton first immersed Dr. Sung, and then Dr. Sung in turn baptized twenty-one women and twelve men. Did such an event have any precedent? [page 95]

13. Sinners in Large Numbers

Some of the leaders at Bethel were inclined to be critical of John for keeping to the big cities while others went to the smaller and more out-of-the-way places. To this his answer was: “What attracted me about the big cities was not the comfort to be found there, but sinners in large numbers. The cross we all had to bear was different in country towns, but in the big city campaigns the strain on one’s physical and nervous strength was greater, the work itself harder, and the opposition greater. The sowing of the seed had to be watered by sweat and tears. There was no question of my choosing the more comfortable pathway!”

When the rest of the Band returned, the whole group reached an understanding that they would not again divide up or allow differences of opinion to weaken their strength. In planning their future campaigns, they would seek a closer cooperation and the clear leading of God! [page 106]

14. Repentance and Salvation in Shantung

Dr. Paul Abbott reported of the work of the Bethel Band in Shantung:

“Bloodthirsty bandits, rapacious officials, overbearing soldiers, anarchistic students, dishonest servants, polygamists, sedate scholars, business-men, rickshaw coolies, beggars, men and women, young and old, city-dwellers and country folks, were moved to confess and forsake sin and to make reparation and restitution.” An impressive list indeed! [page 107]

15. Even Missionaries Touched by Sung’s Work

What a sinner needs, John emphasized, is not the gift of tongues or any other such gift, but the gift of salvation. To seek the gifts without first dealing with sin is a dangerous thing, which all too often leads to the deceptions of the Devil! Some twenty missionaries from the surrounding cities attended these meetings and were themselves deeply moved. They went back to their work with a new zeal and a new faith in the power of the Word of God. [page 109]

16. The Holy Spirit’s Unity

Only the Spirit’s fire can do away with the differences which divide Christians, melt their hearts and unite them in true harmony and fellowship. [page 111]

17. Reviving Power from God Himself

In Hengyang the three churches combined to arrange the special meetings. The following is the account of the campaign written by the Rev. J. R. Wilson of the Church Missionary Society immediately after the meetings:

"Have you ever longed to meet a personality full of the glory of the Gospel who could present the message with a zeal and enthusiasm equal to his theme, a Pauline personality? The Chinese can be painfully matter-of-fact, and their services are often dull and unemotional. Ever since coming to China twenty years ago, I have longed for someone to come and do what I cannot do—that is, to live and speak the glory of the Gospel. Then suddenly a living flame of Gospel zeal leapt upon us."

There had been some disappointment when the churches in Hengyang learned that Andrew Gih would not be coming as leader of the Bethel Band after all because Dr. Sung, upon whom the burden of preaching would now fall, was reported to be a sensationalist and some feared that the mission would prove a failure. But Mr. Wilson's report continues:

"Dr. Sung brought us a great gale of reviving power from God Himself... The Chinese confessed readily that this was no other than the boundless energy of the Spirit of God. For a whole week, twice a day, for two or more hours at each meeting, he poured out a living stream of searching Bible teaching, agonized prayer and ecstatic praise, all intensified by vivid acting, scathing sarcasm and exuberant humor. His physical antics were astonishing. He leapt about the platform, he dashed off point after point on the blackboard, he made lessons stand out vividly with lightning sketches in chalk, he acted humorously, grotesquely even, to make a story live, he prayed with a fervor that seemed to pour out life itself and then, as a climax, when his message had been delivered, he would be transported with joy and glory for a full half-hour, while he carried us along on wave after wave of devotion and praise. It was a revelation! It was marvelously inspiring! The exceeding weight of glory found expression in a fellow human being, and it could not be denied.

"What was there in him to bring us lasting good? First he made Scripture live. Who can forget his rendering of Ezekiel 37? He held two dry bones in his hands. In mock show, he struck them one against the other like two dead church members engaged in a quarrel. 'Can dead bones hear the Word of the Lord?' he shouted. 'Praise God, they can't. There's hope for a dead church when the true Word of God is preached. Secondly, backsliders were searched as by a consuming fire. The man who fell among thieves was presented as a type of the church member who has been robbed by the Devil of faith, prayer, Scripture and left half-dead. Why does the Devil leave him half-dead and not finish him off? Because churches full of robbed and half-dead Christians will help the Devil's cause more than anything else. Live Christians must do the work of rescuing

and restoring to the half-dead their treasures of faith, prayer and Scripture. Thirdly he led us to enthusiastic determination to follow Christ to the uttermost. We had a great morning when he led us up the Hill of the Beatitudes. Step by step each Beatitude was taken to represent steps in our Lord's life; from the Incarnation to Calvary... At each step as we climbed higher and higher came the ringing call, 'Forward march!' and a stirring chorus. And so we struggled on to the summit 'persecuted for righteousness sake!' Suddenly we were startled by the Cross being planted on the final blackboard peak. Could we follow all the way to Calvary?... 'Oh, Jesus, make us all willing to follow Thee all the way!'"

These words were written with the effects of the campaign vividly fresh in the memory. But twenty years later Mr. Wilson recollects those days in these words: "Such was the power of the presentation of the messages, that many of them are still vivid in my memory. Even the choruses are there in my mind all complete, indelible! . . . Another outstanding memory was the afternoon when Dr. Sung invited anyone who wished to unburden their hearts to meet him privately. At the special request of my three Chinese colleagues, I went with them. After hearing their stories, very sad in places, and recording names and details in an enormous notebook, Dr. Sung gave the rest of the time to prayer. With tears streaming down his face, he agonized in prayer for us that we might be victorious over sin by the power of the Cross of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit." [pages 117-119]

18. People Waited Long for Dr. Sung's Meetings

And labor hard he did. His reputation continued to spread rapidly and everywhere he went the crowds thronged to hear him—the homespun doctor of philosophy with his eccentric ways and unpredictable methods. People usually arrived two or three hours before the meetings were due to begin in order to be sure of seats. Then they sat on after one meeting until the time for the next to be sure to be present.

The meetings always began with singing, Sung himself sometimes conducting the singing with a white handkerchief. The audience would be asked to clap their hands to the time. Unison prayer followed. Then after a prayer by the preacher in a few sentences the sermon began. As John walked to the rostrum, he always had with him the precious book in which he had collected his daily jottings, though he seldom referred to it while preaching. [page 122]

19. Decorations Used as Illustration

In one mission station the missionary had beautifully decorated the platform with all her palms, ferns and pots of geraniums. Dr. Sung was emphasizing the uselessness of half-measures in dealing with sin when he noticed the plants. "No use just pruning sin and cutting it down a little! You must pull it up by the roots!" And suiting the action to

the word, he set to work to pull the plants up one by one, strewing them about the floor. There were no floral decorations on the platform the next day. [page 123]

20. Followed God's Direction

Several churches were competing to get Dr. Sung to be their pastor, so he began to pray: "Lord, if you want me still to be an itinerant evangelist, please open the door for campaigns in five provinces and send me \$800 for my expenses within the next month!" As soon as news of Dr. Sung's new situation got abroad through the pages of *Evangelism*, *Morning Star*, and other publications, invitations poured in. They came from the five provinces of Kiangsu, Chekiang, Anhwei, Hopeh, and Shantung. And registered letters reached him from Changsha, Paoting, Peking, Shihkiachwang, Paotow, Saratsi, and other cities, with money gifts ranging from \$20 to \$50, some of them from anonymous donors and others from people he did not know. The total exceeded the sum he had asked for! He was completely reassured. "I offered myself again to serve my faithful, unchanging Lord. Come wind, come weather, through cloud and sunshine, if God is with me, I ask for nothing else." [page 124]

21. Struggled with His Inabilities

Later John returned to Hangchow for a two weeks' convention at two churches. But this time he met with a mixed reception and was provoked to concentrate his fire on those leaders who withheld their support. He was conscious of his inability to handle such situations with the power and patience needed. "Though I have a love of souls, but cannot sympathize with the weakness of others; and if my zeal is so hot as to scorch others, but if I cannot in love bind up their wounds, what wonder is it those that are hurt accuse me of being a persecutor of the church! So I count not myself to have apprehended that for which I have been apprehended of Christ Jesus." [page 127]

22. Meetings Well Prepared for by Prayer

From Foochow, Dr. Sung travelled south to Amoy, where several series of meetings had been arranged by the Five-Year Movement Committee of the Synod of the South Fukien church in Hweian, Chuanchow, Changchow and Amoy. The meetings were well prepared for by prayer and there was an atmosphere of expectancy. Dr. Sung spent a week in each place from October 13th to November 13th, speaking three times a day wherever he went, the meetings seldom lasting less than three hours. [page 128]

23. Interpreters Became Evangelists Imitating Dr. Sung

The interpreters had to follow suit in every gesture he made and even in acting out scenes. As a result, he always left a few disciples wherever he went. Afterwards they went out as free-lance evangelists to preach on their own, imitating Dr. Sung's every

pose, especially that of putting one foot forward, with the heel resting on the floor and the sole of the shoe showing forward! [page 131]

24. Dr. Sung Touched the Philippines

A missionary, writing in 1954, reports: "So many of the true Christians in the Philippines are the direct result of John Sung's ministry." [page 143]

25. A Great Bible Student

But John himself was full of the Bible. He read nothing else except the daily paper. Since his experience in America he had been a man of one book only. Hours a day used to be spent on his knees with his open Bible and the notebook in which he wrote down the truths that were revealed to him, only a small part of which he ever shared with others. His mind was completely saturated with the Word of God, and so, even if his Bible Teaching was completely original few men can have been so successful in infecting others with his own deep love for the Book. [page 145]

26. Every Session Pure Bible Study

At the opening meeting, delegates from each place went in groups on to the platform and sang a chorus of their own choice. The pianist was Miss Esther Hsieh (Mrs. Peter Chung) who subsequently became Dr. Sung's interpreter and assistant. Dr. Sung's first address was an exposition of I Tim. i.3-30 under the following headings: (1) Distinguish truth from error (verses 3, 4); (2) pursue love (verse 5); (3) and humility (verses 6-II); (4) give glory to God (verse 17); (5) fight the good fight (verses 12-18); (6) keep a good conscience (verses 19-20). This was a fair sample of Dr. Sung's method of handling Scripture.

The next day, the regular time-table of two long sessions a day began-7.30 to 11 a.m. and 7 to 10.30 p.m. The time was the middle of a southern summer, with high temperatures and great humidity. But, beginning at the first chapter of Genesis, Dr. Sung took his audience right through the entire Bible, chapter by chapter, until he reached the last chapter of Revelation. These were no evangelistic talks, nor were they revival messages. Each and every session was pure Bible study, interspersed with numerous references to his own personal experience as a Christian, all the time emphasizing the need for holiness and consecration of life. Has any other Bible teacher ever attempted anything comparable? Surely this was a phenomenal effort for one man in a month! All the addresses were taken down verbatim and published in book form the same year. The volume was published again in Formosa in 1952, and contains 554 pages. [page 154]

27. Dr. Sung's Death

It was daybreak when, at 7:07 a.m. on August 18th, at the age of forty-two, John Sung fell asleep. The circle of relatives and friends were quietly praying around the bed.
[page 189]