

A
COMMENTARY
on the
NEW TESTAMENT

by **Robert Hawker**

Volume One
The Gospels

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The Poor Man's New Testament Commentary: Volume One

by Robert Hawker (1753-1827)

Taken from the 1815 edition by Sherwood, Neely and Jones of London

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Foreword

I have long cherished my nine-volume set of Robert Hawker's *Poor Man's Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, not so much for its exegetical expertise as for its heartwarming, devotional character. Hawker's six volumes on the Old Testament and three on the New Testament, which contain the entire text of the Authorized Version of the Scriptures, are highly informative on certain texts but make little or no comment on other texts. Obviously, Hawker did not aim for the exegetical acuity of John Calvin, the homiletical breadth of Matthew Henry, or the pastoral succinctness of Matthew Poole. Rather, his purpose was to edify believers by providing spiritual and experiential comments on each section of Scripture. Consequently, these volumes are most profitable as a daily devotional rather than as a regular commentary. The prayerful "reflections" section that follows Hawker's comments on each chapter of Scripture marvelously enhance this devotional character. They alone are worth the purchase of these volumes. Here is one sample to whet your appetite. Reflecting on John 18, Hawker writes:

Oh! Gethsemane! Sacred, hallowed spot! Did Jesus oft-times resort thither with his disciples? And wilt thou now, O LORD, by thy sweet Spirit, aid my meditations, that I may take the wing of faith and often traverse over the solemn ground? It was a garden in which the first Adam began to break through the fence of God's holy plantation. And in a garden the second Adam, so called, shall begin the soul-travail of sorrow, to do away the effects of it. And, oh! What humiliation, what agonies, what conflicts in the arduous work? Oh! How vast the glory, when smiting to the earth his enemies, the LORD JESUS proved his GODHEAD by the breath of his mouth! Sweetly do I see thee, LORD, by faith, going forth a willing sacrifice. Lo! I come! said JESUS. So come, LORD, now, by grace!

Hail, thou King of Zion, for thou hast here most blessedly borne testimony to this glorious truth. Then as a King do thou reign and rule over thy Church, thy people, both in heaven and earth. And let my soul continually discover the goings of my GOD and King, in his sanctuary. Surely, dear LORD, it is thine, both by nature, providence, grace, and glory, to maintain and order, to regulate and appoint, to establish and confirm thy royal laws, and the government of thy kingdom, in the hearts and minds of all thy people, whom thou hast made willing in the day of thy power! Reign thou, and rule in me, the LORD of life and glory! Amen.

Hawker's devotional commentary is so named because it was originally published in small "penny" portions to be affordable to the poor. The New Testament portions were gathered and published in four volumes in 1815 and 1816 by W. Stratford of London. A few years before he died, Hawker completed a new edition, titled *The Poor Man's Commentary on the New Testament: A new edition, corrected, with final amendments of the author*, 4 vols. (London: Printed for Sherwood, Gilbert, and Piper by B. M'Millan, 1823-26). By 1850, several improved editions had been published in three volumes. Though Hawker's other writings were reprinted in the twentieth century, his commentary was not. We are grateful that Solid Ground Christian Books is making this edifying work available again. We commend it for private and family worship.

Hawker was a prolific author and Calvinist preacher in the Church of England who, like Samuel Rutherford, became known for his love for Christ. That love is abundant on nearly every page of his comments as well as throughout his reflections. Hawker excels in Christ-centered, experiential divinity. He was taught by the Spirit how to find Christ in the Scriptures, as well as how to present Him to hungry sinners in search of daily communion with a personal Redeemer. For the genuine Christian, here is devotional writing at its best: it is always warmly Christ-centered, eminently practical, personally searching.

The only definitive biography of Hawker is by John Williams, who sat under Hawker's ministry before becoming pastor of Stroud, Gloucestershire. That biography is in the preface to volume 1 of Hawker's *Works* and was first published in 1831. Of Hawker's writings, Williams notes, "His remarks exhibit a great warmth of affection, a lively energy of expression, a graceful flow of language, and an affluent store of scriptural sentiments. There is a lovely simplicity in his sublimest thoughts, and in his humblest themes a becoming dignity."

Robert Hawker was born to God-fearing parents April 13, 1753, at Exeter, England. His father, a reputable surgeon, and his young sister died when he was an infant. He was raised by his mother with the help of two aunts, one of whom taught him to memorize numerous portions of Scripture before he went to school. The memorized Scripture served him well throughout his long ministry and convinced him that the early education of all children should be centered on the Word of God. Out of this conviction, Hawker compiled *The Child's First and Second Books*, consisting of simple lessons or illustrations from Scripture.

As a child, Hawker attended Exeter's grammar school, where he learned Greek and Latin. His mother, who wanted her son to be a physician like his father, had him study surgery and medicine under Dr. White, a surgeon from Plymouth.

At the age of eighteen, Hawker married Anne Rains. They had eight children. Hawker pursued further training in the hospitals of London prior to spending three years as assistant surgeon in the royal marines. Against this background, he would later write *Zion's Warrior, or the Christian Soldier's Manual*, in which he described the spiritual dimensions of the duties and occupations of the military life.

While in the marines, Hawker had numerous religious impressions and decided to pursue the ministry. He entered Oxford University as a member of Magdalen Hall in 1778. He took holy orders and became curate of St. Martin for three months prior to becoming curate to John Bedford, vicar of Charles, near Plymouth. Upon Bedford's death in 1784, Hawker became vicar of Charles, where he enjoyed the love and respect of his congregation for the next forty-three years. He was buried on his seventy-fourth birthday, Good Friday, 1827.

In his early years as pastor of Charles, Hawker corrected his erroneous views on the doctrines of grace. He abandoned his former convictions that a sinner's salvation depended upon an act of free will and embraced the Calvinistic doctrines of salvation by Christ alone, through grace alone.

Hawker reached out to people beyond Charles through his prolific writing and a variety of religious activities. In 1792 he was awarded a doctorate of divinity by Edinburgh University for his *Sermons on the Divinity of Christ*. In 1797 he accepted the deputy-chaplaincy of the garrison at Plymouth. In 1802 he founded The Great Western Society for Dispersing Religious Tracts among the Poor. In 1813 he established the Corpus Christi Society, which aimed to provide spiritual and financial relief to "the body of Christ."

Meanwhile, Hawker increased in fame and popularity as a powerful "high Calvinist" preacher. He rejected indiscriminate gospel offers and invitations on theological grounds, yet was remarkably winsome in preaching Christ to all. He believed in "holding up" Christ to all rather than offering him to all. For many years, he annually visited London where he preached to crowds in some of the city's most renowned pulpits and was much used for the conversion of sinners and the edification of saints.

Hawker's major writings are included in his ten volumes of works except for *The Poor Man's Commentary on the Old and New*

Testaments. Other principal books not yet mentioned include *The Poor Man's Morning and Evening Portion*, which became his most popular work; *Sermons on the Divinity and Operations of the Holy Spirit*; *Paraclesis, or Consolations for a Dying Hour*; *Zion's Pilgrim*; *The Sailor Pilgrim*; *Visits to and from Jesus upon the most interesting occasions*; *Lectures on the Person, Godhead, and Ministry of the Holy Ghost*; *The Poor Man's Concordance and Dictionary to the Sacred Scriptures*; *Catechisms and Books for the Use of Children*. His works contain nearly a hundred articles on various subjects, two volumes of sermons, and a volume of expositions of "Scripture extracts."

Hawker lived and died by the doctrines of free grace. On the day after his seventieth birthday, he wrote:

From the first dawn of the day-spring which from on high visited me, when the Lord was pleased to bring me into acquaintance with myself, and to make me know the plague of my own heart, I have been unlearning what I had before been studying with so much care—how to recommend myself by human merit to divine favour. But when the Lord in mercy took me under his pupilage, he inverted this order of teaching. I was then led to see more of his ways, and to think less of my own. And from that hour of matriculation in his school to the present, I have been learning to get daily out of love with myself, and in love with Christ. And so it hath proved, that in the exact ratio in which I have advanced in the knowledge and love of the Lord, and in the ways of grace, I have been going back in my estimation of all creature excellency and creature attainments.

As a daily devotional or in family worship, let these volumes of Hawker bring the Word of God close to your conscience. Above all, pray for the Spirit to apply his writing to you, so that Christ may increase in you and self may decrease (John 3:30). That, after all, was Hawker's great goal.

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