

Lessons from the Friends of William Cowper

By Susan Verstraete

Any way you look at it, the poet William Cowper (pronounced “Cooper”) had a difficult life. His mother and five siblings died by the time William was six years old. He was sent to a boarding school where an older student abused him. As an adult he battled delusions and depression. And although he never recorded a single doubt about the character of God or the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross as propitiation of sin, he spent years wavering in the assurance of his own salvation.



But Cowper was blessed with friends. From childhood until his death, Cowper was surrounded with people who came alongside him to offer encouragement and support. Some were wiser than others, but we can learn about friendship from all of them.

We learn that we can’t protect our friends from God-ordained suffering. William Cowper’s mother died when he was only six years old. Young William’s nurses assumed it was better to spare him that grief. Instead of being truthful, they told him that she “went on a long trip.” Later he looked out the window and saw the hearse as it left the house. He realized the truth, but even then, the nurses assured Cowper his mother would soon be back, confusing the boy and prolonging his grief.

We learn that it’s important to listen carefully to our friends. After Cowper finished an internship in the law, his uncle arranged for him to test for a clerking position in the House of Lords. Cowper begged him to reconsider, terrified of the test and unsuited for the job, but the uncle did not listen. He insisted on forcing Cowper to take the examination to secure the position and to protect him from financial uncertainty. The pressure was too much for Cowper. The night before the test, he tried three times to commit suicide.

We learn that we must tell our friends the truth. After his first failed attempts to end his own life, Cowper was placed in the care of Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, an evangelical who offered a peaceful Christian home for mental patients. Dr. Cotton befriended Cowper but did not try to protect him from the truth about his spiritual condition. He did not minimize the fact that Cowper sinned in trying to take his own life. Instead, he told him over and over that Christ died to save sinners. Over the next eight months, Cowper gradually left behind his delusions and despair. And one day, as Cowper read Romans 3:25, He “saw the sufficiency of the atonement He [Christ] had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of my justification.”¹

We learn that friendship is vital to mental health. Soon after Cowper left Dr. Cotton’s care, he met and became friends with a theological student, William Unwin. Cowper met Unwin’s parents, Morley and Mary, and was unofficially adopted as a member of

their family. He moved from his solitary, lonely household into their bustling home as a boarder. Cowper said, “For solitude, however some may rave, seeming a sanctuary, proves a grave. A sepulcher in which the living lie, where all good qualities come to die.”² Mary Unwin was to be a surrogate mother to Cowper for the rest of her life, and was able to reason with him when delusion convinced him he could trust no one else.

We learn to encourage our friends to serve others. While living with the Unwins, Cowper met John Newton, the former slave ship captain turned pastor, and author of the hymn, “Amazing Grace.” They were to remain close friends for the rest of Cowper’s life. Newton encouraged Cowper to travel along as he walked to outlying churches to minister the gospel. He also asked Cowper to help him write rhymes to help illiterate church members memorize biblical truth. During this collaboration, Cowper wrote some of his most famous hymns including “There is a Fountain Filled with Blood”, which also illustrated the hope that Cowper possessed during this period. (“The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain in his day; and there have I, though vile as he, washed all my sins away.”³) Cowper’s doubts and distresses were least severe when he was serving others the most. He would later say, “Absence of occupation is not rest. A mind quite vacant is a mind distressed.”⁴

We learn that our friends will remain flawed in this life. Cowper died in 1800 in the home of yet another friend—a second cousin that he considered an adopted son—Dr. John Johnson. Johnson loved Cowper and cared for him at immense personal cost, but his methods were strange and may often have done more harm than good. For example, when Cowper’s beloved retriever died, Johnson went to great expense to have it stuffed so that Cowper would not have to give up the animal. He did not, however, hire a skilled taxidermist. The resulting overstuffed, lumpy dog was a constant reminder of Cowper’s loss. But Johnson meant well, and his errors, though many, sprang from a loving heart.

Cowper was plagued with doubts about his standing before God right up until death and could find no comfort in the reassurances of his friends or the promises of the Bible. But Dr. Johnson said that in death, “he wore a look of holy surprise.”⁵ Newton wrote a farewell poem to his friend in which he imagined what he would say when they met again in heaven. He penned, “I told thee that thy God would bring thee here, And God’s own hand would wipe away thy tear, while I should claim a mansion by thy side. I told thee so—for our Emmanuel died.”⁶

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² Cowper, William, *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, Gall and Inglis, 1890, pg. 114 (In the poem “Retirement”)

³ Ibid, pg. 242 Olney Hymns, “Praise for the Fountain Opened”

⁴ Ibid, pg.112 In the poem “Retirement”

⁵ Ella, pg. 584

⁶ Ella, pg. 584

¹ Ella, George, *William Cowper: Poet of Paradise*, Evangelical Press, 1993, pg. 90