

Henry H. Halley - A Memoir



Henry Hampton Halley lived from 1874 to 1965. I remember him as a tall, quiet man who always had a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. Our family called him Papa Daddy. He was my great-grandfather, and while I knew him for only a short time, the many stories shared by my parents and grandparents about his life and ministry have created a long-lasting memory. He was a loving and devoted husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather — but more importantly, he was a great man of God. His calling was simple

— God put it on his heart to help people read, understand, and love God's Word.

Henry Halley was born on a Kentucky bluegrass farm and grew up in the environment of a Christian home. His father had been a Confederate soldier who was one of "Morgan's Men." The public school system in White Sulphur, Kentucky, was poor, so Henry's parents joined with other farmers in conducting a private school for their children. At age 16, the young Henry enrolled at Kentucky University in Lexington (now Transylvania College), getting his A.D. and B.D. degrees in five years. He taught at his alma mater for a year, followed by another year on the faculty of the Women's Missionary College in Hazel Green, Kentucky.

His first pastorate in the Disciples of Christ Church began in 1897 in Kalkaska, Michigan, a lumber camp region. He duly called on all the people, including the Canadian-born, lady principal of the high school. Papa Daddy would often tell the story with a smile: "It was my pastoral duty to call on the principal, Madge Gillis — but could I help it when my heart started thumping as we talked about schools and souls?" It wasn't long before duty calls became pleasure calls — and then, to the delight of the Kalkaskans, courtship, love, and a marriage that lasted 65 years!

The young clergyman now had what it took — a fine faith and a fine wife. The Kalamazoo (Mich.) Christian Church heard of the up-and-coming minister and called him. Upon arrival, the Halleys found a congregation worshipping in a hall. They led the people in building first a chapel, then an impressive sanctuary. For eight years Henry and Madge worked like beavers in their new parish. Their 1900-1908 pastorate ended when the doctor gave Henry an ultimatum.

"You'll have to get outdoors and do physical labor — or else," he said. Henry obeyed. He resigned his pulpit, but remained an active member of the congregation. This seemed to Henry to be the end of his pastoral career — but God had other plans for his life.

Henry started building houses — doing the rough labor while craftsmen he hired took on the skilled work — and selling them when finished. One year sped past and then another as Henry, an ambitious young contractor and Realtor, found it impossible to break away from his business. In 1912, a friend interested him in real estate speculation in the orange groves of California. Moving there for one year, he got the groves under way, then returned to Kalamazoo.

He made seven round trips to the Pacific Coast the next year to look after the orange trees. Each journey was a monotonous four-day ride. Henry, being rather shy, was not inclined to make acquaintances on the train, and time hung heavy. One day as he gazed out of the car window at the endless prairies, the idea struck him to improve the hours by memorizing Bible passages. He first tackled the Sermon on the Mount, next the Epistle of James. Although he was then 39, he found that by intensive application he could retain in his mind whole passages even though, as he said, "I had not only an untrained but also a very ordinary memory." He was soon to prove he could make it extraordinary by constant drills.

Although his work as a building contractor boomed, Henry was so fascinated by his Scripture memorizing experiment that he started devoting several hours a day to it — mostly in the evenings. One day his telephone rang.

"Come over and preach for us Sunday," a deacon from a church outside Kalamazoo asked him. He agreed to go. When it came time for the sermon, he stepped into the pulpit only to discover he had no notes and had forgotten his outline. The Lord directed him to deliver his message to the people literally in Bible language — reciting to them in a quiet but deeply moving manner, verbatim, the Sermon on the Mount and other Scripture selections. So great was the response that the church service eventually was to prove a turning point in Henry's career. Many calls came from other churches, and in each he recited whole passages from memory.

Henry moved his growing family to Chicago in 1914. By then, he and Madge were the parents of four children: two sons and two daughters. He entered the real estate business there, but it was at this time that the idea came to memorize the entire Bible in abridged form, covering the heart of every book in it. Up to this point he had been memorizing various selections, but the "big idea," which at first almost overwhelmed him, would not fade from his thoughts.

He tackled the job - between sales and after hours - in a double-barreled manner. One task was to select the passages to be committed to memory and arrange them in connected form; the other was to intensify the memorization process. At night he would pore over an American Standard (Revised) Version of the Bible, thumbing the pages, marking sections, and underscoring verses in his effort to condense it into the one-third he finally learned by heart. This volume, which was worn to tatters, is now a sacred family keepsake.

Henry found, in going to and returning from his office, in riding streetcars and in walking to make business calls, in odd moments between office duties and even at meals, that he had much

time available for memory work. Sometimes in the middle of the night he would awaken to find his subconscious mind actively imprinting passages on his brain.

Thus, over a period of 10 years, the preacher-builder spent at least 10,000 hours in achieving probably one of the greatest feats of memorization of Scripture known to man. He could recite a total of 25 hours of nothing but Scripture, including narratives of every book from the longest to the shortest. Job, for example, took only 15 minutes for giving the whole theme of the story, while Genesis took a whole evening's lecture of some 45 minutes.

The Gospels he treated differently, dividing them up into eight readings — four on the life of Christ, compiled from a harmony of the Gospels, and four on the sayings of Jesus. In his reading of the life of Christ he gave predominate emphasis to the Resurrection, for, he said, "that is the most important part of the New Testament."

As Henry's fame spread, calls came not only for individual Scripture "sermons," but for a series running a week or more, from individual congregations to groups of interfaith churches assembled from different towns and cities. He found himself gradually getting away from the business world and into "business for the King."

From coast to coast, in 35 states, Henry delivered his Bible lectures. He always opened his recitals with a brief background sketch of the Bible or passages he was to present. Although there were many instances of conversions to Christ through his ministry, his main purpose was always to teach the Bible and encourage the reading of it.

Because of the religious interest of the day, the lectures were more popular in the earlier years than in the hectic days of the late 1920s and early '30s. People liked best the Crucifixion and Resurrection accounts, the Creation story from Genesis, the book of Job, Paul's missionary journeys, the story of Ruth, and the book of Revelation.

Henry was often asked if his memory ever failed him. He would tell the story of one embarrassing incident that occurred while he was reciting the list of the 20 kings of Israel. He got down to the second Jeroboam, but couldn't remember which king followed. So he automatically started with the names following the first Jeroboam, the son of Nebat. When he got down to the second Jeroboam, he was again stumped. So he apologized for his lapse of memory and took up the story . . . omitting the kings.

The other question people often asked was, "Did you always have such an amazing memory?" Henry responded, "As a boy I could stuff my mind easily with my school lessons, and hold the facts long enough to get through tests." He would grin as he continued, "Then it would all evaporate. As for memorizing permanently, that seemed an impossibility. Through college I had much the same experience. Intensive application is the key to victory. If an ordinary person like me can commit to memory one-third of the Bible after he's well along into middle age, why can't millions of others learn the golden passages of God's Word by heart? Of course they can — and they'll get the thrill of a lifetime in doing it!

"What you memorize of the Bible is a constant spur to memorize more," he added. "As you learn a passage word for word, new meanings constantly pour into your mind. You may have read a passage a hundred times, yet hidden truths come out crystal clear as memorization spotlights every sentence into importance."

In 1922, while lecturing in New Albany, Indiana, an incident occurred which was to open up a new phase of his life and later to carve for him a niche in literature's hall of fame.

Every night that week as he was lecturing, an ambitious woman stenographer in the front row noisily shuffled her paper, recording the brief resume of the background of the book with which he opened his lecture. This irritating distraction upset him for the entire lecture. She meant well, not knowing that her turning of the pages annoyed the speaker. Henry made no criticism, but the incident caused a momentous decision - as revealed by succeeding years.

"I'll get out a leaflet containing this information," he told his wife afterward. He printed 20,000 copies of a 16-page leaflet titled "Suggestions Concerning Bible Study." Free for the asking, they went quickly. Then Henry doubled the size, added a heavier paper cover, and gave away another edition of 10,000. This booklet listed the dates of all the books of the Bible and gave the main idea and a brief summary of each.

Each year saw an elaboration of the booklet, but it was not until the seventh edition of 144 pages that the name Halley's Pocket Bible Handbook arrived and stuck. The Handbook soon had a summary of church history, brief outlines, and interesting sidelight facts on the Bible books.

Late in the 1930s another significant addition was made. Henry became passionately interested in archaeology and voraciously read everything he could find on the topic. He wrote to places such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Oriental Institute of Chicago for information and pictures. Roughly 90 selected pictures of archaeological discoveries that illuminated Bible characters and times and a mine of facts that formed a convincing apologetic for the scriptural stories were added to the Handbook.

Soon after the second edition came out, Henry could no longer afford to give away the books, so great was the demand for and increasingly expensive the cost of the books. Not wishing to even appear commercial in his ministry, he hit upon the idea of lending books to interested persons. Then if they wished to keep them, they could remit the price. This system was followed for many years, his only distribution outlet being his lectures.

For 20 years, from 1921 to 1941, Henry continued his Bible Recital ministry, supported by freewill offerings. He spoke before an estimated 2 million people. In the meantime, the Pocket Bible Handbook had now become a volume of several hundred pages and the circulation between the 13th edition in 1939 and the 14th edition in 1941 doubled.

The coming of World War II brought another major change to Henry's career. Travel conditions became almost impossible, significantly impacting his recital ministry. He accepted it as the will of God and felt led to turn his energies full-time to the Handbook.

In 1941, Madge Halley, who in 1923 had resumed her career as a teacher in the Chicago public schools, retired and united efforts with her husband in further developing the Handbook and in compiling a new book called Best Bible Verses. Together they spent 10 to 15 hours daily handling worldwide correspondence, revising and enlarging the publications, and answering Bible queries.

Mr. and Mrs. Halley loved the busy, bustling city. They had their office in the heart of Chicago's famous "Loop," and their home in a lofty apartment just a few blocks away, adjoining State Street. By this time their children had been scattered — their sons both became doctors, one daughter a homemaker, and the other a recognized artist and businesswoman. The number of grandchildren was increasing, as evidenced by home and office walls adorned with their pictures.

Apart from the Handbook, Henry had no real hobbies. That is, no hobbies unless you consider his pet theme of Sunday morning churchgoing a hobby. Perhaps an interest picked up from his many years on the road, he would visit a different congregation each Sunday morning to observe its worship service. From this study, he formulated definite ideas of what the Sunday morning service should include.

Henry became increasingly concerned with what he considered "a lack of leadership in the pulpit" in guiding and leading church members in reading the Bible. He felt that churches were growing cold and people were losing their love of the faith. The recipe for revival, in his opinion, was following the admonition: "The most important thing in this book is this simple suggestion: that each church have a congregational plan of Bible reading and that the pastor's sermon be from the part of the Bible read the past week." Henry believed that this suggestion, if followed, would produce a revitalized church and bring about a grand revival, provided the minister himself thoroughly believes that the Bible is God's Word.

Henry's second pet peeve about the average church service was the preaching. He was heard to say, "There is almost no Bible preaching in the average church — too much allegorizing and metaphorizing. People can sit for a lifetime even in the modern fundamental church and not know anything about the Bible. Preaching should be plain simple Bible teaching."

In the 1950s, the Halleys began work with foreign missionaries who translated the Handbook into other languages. The initial translations were in Japanese and Korean. In 1956, as many as 20,000 copies of the Japanese edition of the Handbook had been sold. That year word came from a prominent missionary: "Halley's Bible Handbook is the undisputed Christian best-seller in Japan; only the Bible stands before it. In fact, in the history of Christian literature in Japan, nothing comparable can be cited." The list of foreign-language editions printed over time includes Spanish, Chinese, French, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Thai, Russian, Swahili, and many more.

The early editions of the Pocket Bible Handbook were printed by Rand McNally & Company in Indiana. In May 1960, Andrew McNally III, president of Rand McNally, presented Henry and Madge Halley with a specially bound millionth copy. At this point, it was in its 22nd edition, ran to 968 pages, and sold for \$3.75. It had been selling more than 60,000 copies a year.

On June 17, 1960, Henry granted Zondervan Publishing House the rights to Halley's Bible Handbook. It became one of the most important books that Zondervan has ever published and for many years was one of the top-selling volumes on Zondervan's list. Today there are more than 5 million copies in print. The Handbook was last revised — its 24th edition — in 1964 just before Henry Halley's death in 1965 at the age of 91. Mr. and Mrs. Halley are laid to rest near their family roots in Lexington, Kentucky.

Henry Halley's daughter, Julia Halley Berry, and her husband, Henry S. Berry, became active in the development of the 24th edition of the Handbook. They also assumed management responsibilities for Halley's Bible Handbook, Inc., after Henry Halley's death. Mrs. Berry designed all of the maps included in the 24th edition. The maps on the endpapers of this new edition were among those she designed; they have been included as a tribute to her tireless efforts over many years to preserve the spirit and continuing impact of her father's life work.

In 1997, Mrs. Henry Berry, my grandmother, entrusted the ongoing management of the Handbook to my husband and me. We are greatly blessed to have the opportunity to lead the ongoing ministry of Halley's Bible Handbook into the new millennium. We pray that this 25th edition of Halley's Bible Handbook will continue the God-directed, global ministry that Henry H. Halley began with the heartfelt desire that every person who reads this Handbook will gain a greater understanding and love for God's Word.

— Patricia Wicker
January 10, 2000
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Reprinted from Halley's Bible Handbook, Copyright © 2000, 2007 by Halley's Bible Handbook, Inc.