



“You will know them by their fruits.” Mt. 7:16

F. G. HIBBARD

(Methodist)

Twice within now nearly forty years of my Christian life have I been brought, through infinite mercy, to the experience and evidence of perfect love. The ancient command may not be inappropriate to me: “Thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee those forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thy heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments or no.” Deut. 8:2. But I can speak only of a few points.

Conviction the First Time

A definite, deep, and abiding conviction of the necessity of this work preceded my seeking it. The circumstances that awakened this conviction, accompanied as it was with an awful apprehension of losing my hold on God, and at last losing my soul also without it, was the timidity and dread I felt in doing all my duty. The duties which I felt I could not perform were, 1. A regular habit of confessing Christ in social meetings; 2. Vocal prayer in social meetings; 3. Family prayer in my father’s family in his absence. Hitherto my mother had kept up this duty, in my father’s absence. I felt I ought to perform it. I was a convert of five months’ old. My secret duties were regular; class and church attendance irrefragable; my life religious, and my conscience tender. But I had strength only occasionally to speak for Jesus a few words in a social meeting, and thought I absolutely could not pray vocally in the hearing of any person.

No one will ever suffer more than I did for two months, till I was driven to the brink of despair. I was young, and untaught in these ways; yet the Spirit told me that nothing but a complete surrender of my all, to be governed wholly and without reserve by the will of God, at all times on all occasions, in all places and conditions, would ever meet the wants of my soul. I had made many promises; greatly increased my faithfulness in all duties, except those public ones, in hopes to grow into spiritual strength sufficient to lift these crosses also; had promised the Lord, if he would give me the blessing I sought, so as to assure me that I had strength adequate, I would then go forward in duty; had set apart weeks of prayer, fasting, watching, and special labor, for the longed-for grace.

But all availed not; my heart seemed more barren, dark and distant from God than ever; and I grew thoroughly alarmed at what I justly considered my wretched and perilous state. The thoughts of my social religious duties haunted me like spectres of Sheol. I saw our older brethren pray and speak in social meetings without any embarrassment, as though they enjoyed it; and I deemed them the happiest and most honored of men. I thought perhaps, by the time I was as old as they, I should be able to do the same.

The Vow At Last

My distress of mind so increased, though I was leading a life of daily prayer and self-denial, and special pleading for holiness, that I felt a length the controversy must be decided. I dropped my work one day, went alone to one of my places of prayer in the barn, and fell before God with something of the shuddering as though I was going to be burnt as a sacrifice, and, with feelings I can never describe, pronounced the vow which I had so long dreaded, in about the following words: “*O Lord! I here end*

my controversy with Thee; I give Thee my all. From this moment, henceforth, I consent, and solemnly engage, to do all Thy known will, at all times, in all places, under all circumstances, according to my best ability, through thy grace, without any exception, reservation or delay, at whatever cost to myself, even though it should take my life."

I continued in prayer and weeping for some time before the throne. I confessed my sin of fearfulness and timidity, and threw myself, as I never did before, into the arms of God. I felt instant strength, peace, light, and comfort. A mountainous burden rolled from my heart, and I lighted up like a vessel relieved of her too-heavy load. I had done my duty, and I felt that God accepted me. My faith rallied, and I was wonderfully stronger. I had not expected the blessing I so much desired, and my mind did not once recur to the possibility that I might even then have already tasted it. I had only engaged to do all the known will of God in every instance, and to seek for the sanctifying grace till I found it, if it were to my life's end. The dividing-line between me and the world was now clearly drawn, the unmistakable landmarks set up; and was sustained by a consciousness that I was the Lord's

In this frame I returned to my employment with a feeling of satisfaction to which I had been altogether a stranger for months. Soon, however, the thought flashed across my mind, "What have you done? Your vow was premature and rash. You knew that you never could perform the duties to which you are now irrevocably pledged. You have left no provision, no condition, no possibility of modifying your course according to circumstances; and next Sunday you will be called upon to speak and pray before a congregation. You will fail, and your awful vow will be broken. You have added sin to your past course. That, at least, was prudent; this is presumptuous and impracticable." Instantly I felt myself sinking into deep waters, and a horror of great darkness came over me. The temptation seemed truthful. It had all my past bitter experience to corroborate it, and I had no faith to contradict it. I dropped my work, and returned to the same place of prayer, and falling before God, wept out a prayer and confession: "O Lord! I am wretched and helpless and ignorant, and totally in the power of the Tempter. Lord, I intended only to fulfill my duty in making the vow. I cannot tell whether those awful doubts are the temptations of Satan, or the truthful suggestions of Thy Spirit. I am fixed in my purpose to do all Thy will. If these suggestions are from Thee and I have been rash in my vow, oh! Forgive me, and pity my ignorance; but if they are temptations, and if I have done only my duty, come to me, strengthen me, teach me, help me to keep my vow, and I will abide in it, though it cost me my life."

My prayer was uttered from the depths, like one sinking for the last time in deep waters. To me all was real as eternity. I think I could have gone to the stake for Christ, even without spiritual comfort, if I had been assured of His will. My vow was made with a fullest expectation of losing my good name; of being counted a fool for Christ's sake; of being baffled and defeated, and put to shame, in my attempts to do my duty, but with an unalterable purpose to do all the known will of God. Had I done the will of God in making the vow? Was I now in the line of duty? I had scarcely ended my prayer of agony when the answer came. My soul was filled with peace, light and joy. God gave me "wherewith to answer him that reproached me; for I trusted in His word" Ps. 119:42 My way was plain. The Tempter left me. I was never again attacked at that point.

Up to that time, I had expected to be baffled in my attempts to pray in public; to be a trial to my brethren, and a jeer to my unconverted youthful friends, and, perhaps, dishonor from all, on account of my weakness. But now my anxiety on these points was gone. My faith in God became so settled and strong, that I seemed to "rejoice as a strong man to run a race." I longed for opportunity to speak for Jesus. It is strange, but I never from that hour felt any embarrassment from lack of words or self-possession in performing my social duties. Satan had kept me bound; but Christ now set me free. The fear of man was gone. I believe I then received the blessing I sought; but as my faith was not directed to that point, and as I had it fixed in my mind that I was only entering the way as a seeker of sanctifying grace, it never once occurred to me that this might possibly be the thing I sought.

The Witness

Three weeks passed in daily, hourly seeking by all the means which I knew, or had reason to believe, were acceptable to God. My ideal of sanctification was that of a lad brought up, indeed, in the Christina faith and forms, with some elemental experience of the Spirit's operations, but unable to grasp questions and doctrines theologically, living in a retired and humble sphere, and intent only upon glorifying God in that sphere, without one thought or aspiration beyond. I could derive little aid from human conversations. People did not explain things then as they do now. It was not a Sunday-school age, and the adult mind had not come down to the capacities of babes. And besides I now see that my thoughts dwelt in a region and were occupied with things far beyond my knowledge of words to express, or adequately to understand if others should express them. A few helped me. One old Christian lady helped me so much. Most did not seem to comprehend me. But the Lord understood me; "and He alone did lead me, and there was no strange god with me" Deut 32:12. He enabled me to keep my vow. I did glory in the cross, My peace, faith, hope and love, and purpose of mind, never for a moment wavered, though my emotions experience was not always alike.

My great trial arose from the delay and absence, as I supposed, of that grace which I needed so much in order to glorify God. At the end of three weeks, I was alone in the field one beautiful day of early spring. The clear sky, the glorious sun, the happy birds, and all nature, "quick, and springing into life, were but the symbols of my soul's experience. It was a glorious day within and without. I can never forget that day. I shall never enjoy a happier till I walk the fields of paradise.

As I returned homeward, while the declining sun was dipping low in the west, my soul full of delightful meditation, the thought came to me so distinctly, "This is a glorious day," that I answered, "Yes, it is" -- "You have been greatly blessed today." -- "Yes," I replied, with praise to God. "This is what you have been seeking for." -- "No," I quickly responded: "I have not yet attained," -- "Why not? What is it that you have been asking?" This "Why not?" was the first occasion of directing my mind to a review of the nature and evidences of that blessing I was seeking; and for the first time in my life, I seemed to pause, and have courage to insert the question, "Is this, indeed, the answer of my prayer?" It took some courage to admit the possibility, so far as to put it upon the ground of an open question. "What is it that you want?" seemed to be asked of me. "I want victory over all known sin." "Have you not got it?" -- "Yes," I replied. "What else?" -- "I want power to perform all the known will of God." "Have you not got it?" -- "Yes, praise God," "What else do you want?" -- "I want to love God with all my heart and soul." "Do you not?" -- "Yes, glory to God!"

These and such like questions and answers continued to run through my mind with amazing distinctness; I giving my answers audibly, as if replying to an audible voice, each answer increasing my faith, and my cleared perceptions of the nature and evidences of the work which I had desired, until the final question came, "Well, have you not, then, received the blessing you have asked for?" and my bursting heart answered, "Yes, I have. Blessed be God, my prayers are answered; I will not doubt!" And never from that hour have I doubted for one moment the reality of the work there attested. That was the "beginning of years" to my soul. It was the great Passover act, wherein the "blood of sprinkling" procured a deliverance which eternity alone can adequately commemorate. I afterwards saw why my crosses lay so heavily on a given class of duties, and why it became necessary to lead me in so new paths, though so great conflicts (to me they were great), to so great victory, marking each step with tears and agonies and blessing. About a year after this, I was called to my ministerial life, and it was this intermediate year of special experience and activity in my boyhood home which I afterward saw God had chosen in anticipation of my great calling.

I fear incautious people are sometimes made skeptical of this doctrine of perfect love by hearing it so often confessed that the witness of it has been lost. But is it not as least as often the fact in the case of justification? So that it argues nothing against the reality of the work that the witness is afterward lost,

but only against the watchfulness and fidelity of our hearts. Blessed beyond expression was the period – about a year and a half – which immediately followed this consecration.

It may awaken surprise when I say that the loss of the evidence was occasioned by studying theology. But let me explain. When my call to preach was confirmed, and it became settled that that was to be my life-work, I immediately addressed myself to the task of special preparation by study. I had everything to learn; and a year of preparatory study, before joining conference, was consecrated to severe mental labor in the legitimate sphere of theology. Fields of thought opened before me in all directions, new, indispensable, enchanting.

The physical effect of my excessive study was a severe fit of sickness, while my mind became suddenly enlarged with truths which I had not time to digest or classify. My intellectual thirst was intensified, my ambition aroused, my heart oppressed with the view of my incompetency for the ministry, and my resolute purpose was formed to conquer or die; and I thought, if I could not conquer, I had better die, and be out of the way. History, theology, metaphysics, biography, sacred literature, for several years, were gorged, not masticated.

Strange that I did not see the snare! It was not in the fact or the objects of study, but in my method, and in the unconscious rising of an ambition, which I afterward saw was not wholly sanctified. And then it never entered my mind that any danger to my spiritual life could lie in the path of theological studies. But by being drawn off into themes, which to me, at that time, were subjects of intellectual rather than spiritual and practical interest; by studying theology too much as a science and as a profession, and not enough for the spiritual food, and immediate, practical use,--my soul first became sensibly less fruitful of spiritual things, the fervor of my devotions abated by degrees, the ardor of my love became often chilled by criticism, and a sense of barrenness and want gradually replaced my former joy in the fullness of God.

It was not condemnation; I had no thought of departing from the old paths; my vow of consecration was still held as sacred as ever; but, in spite of all, there was an absence, and my soul often mourned, saying, "Whither is my Beloved gone?" The loss of the evidence was the work of years,--years which had their times of glowing sunshine and gloom, triumphant faith and joy, and despondent mourning. I could say, like Solomon, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept." Song 1:6

The Witness Regained

I cannot follow the details of life, either in providential dispensations or spiritual exercises. I will only say, that the soul having once tasted the fullness of divine love, can never be satisfied with anything less; nor will the conscience operate by any rule of duty below that standard. Satisfaction is a stranger to that breast which lives in a consciousness of having lost the higher life and nearer walk with God, and the perfect resting of faith which characterized former and happier days.

In the spring of 1843, I was brought back. Oh the faithful love of Jesus! He will never leave or forsake us. A growing dissatisfaction with myself had shadowed and embittered my ministerial life for several years, until my distress of mind became insupportable. Intellectually, I had never been better prepared to preach; but, spiritually, I seemed never so ill prepared. Week after week, and month after month, for several years, afforded little alleviation from the habitual despondency and discouragement of my heart. I looked on my right and left, for some possible apology for leaving the ministry; but the "Woe is me if I preach not the gospel!" hung over me, and I saw no escape.

I sometimes asked myself, "Are not the Methodist doctrines and discipline too rigid, and the people too difficult to satisfy? But my conscience and my education always denied this. I opened my mind fully to one only; an aged and venerable father in the gospel, whom I dearly loved. But what can words of

human sympathy and advice do for one who is pining and perishing for the living word and power of God? I must be newly consecrated to God. The old covenant must be recalled and renewed. Nothing but the baptism of the Holy Ghost and Fire would meet my case. Alas! Who can describe the difficulty of a soul fettered and enfeebled with unbelief and timidity in coming directly to God?

At length, God came near in judgment, and took a loved child, an only son. The sword entered into my soul. I knew it was of the Lord: I saw the divine intention, and I determined to submit, and seek a full consecration to God. I cannot describe the conflict of that last month of wrestling before the word of deliverance came. My beloved wife, herself seeking earnestly for the sanctifying Spirit, now saw the method God was taking to wean us from the world and to cleanse us from our idols, bent over the dying couch of the little sufferer, and exclaimed, "O my God! Is the way so narrow, so very narrow?" There was no complaining; but there was great searching of heart. Suffice it to say, we sought and found together.

The blessing came at last: while at our evening family prayers, the usual service was prolonged into a season of wrestling, and our little all was placed again upon the altar. I felt the glorious restoration then; but the full witness did not come till the next morning prayer-meeting at the church.

The Confession

It was the month of March. We were having a series of meetings, embracing a six-o'clock morning prayer-meeting. I was kneeling within the altar, full of blessed thoughts and aspirations, when the duty was presented, then and there, of confessing Christ in His new work in my soul. Strange that I had not foreseen this! Stranger still that it should seem such a trial and cross! For a moment, I thought I could not. It even seemed premature and imprudent. Yet there stood the cross before me: it was mine to bear, and I could not deny it.

But objections arose so forcibly, what could I do? I said, "Lord, it will not be believed, and I shall only dishonor myself and the cause." I said, "Lord, let me wait till I go to a new appointment, then strangers will believe me, and I will come out and make the profession." I said, "Lord, if I profess the blessing, I shall be expected to preach it, and I have not for many years been able to preach it, except in a doctrinal way; and, if my cold manner of preaching contradicts my profession, it will only injure the cause which I attempt to advocate." I said, "Lord, if I have indeed been restored, let my altered life, my spirit, my preaching show it, and let this be my testimony." I said, "Lord, it is a time of great disputation in the churches on this doctrine: many good people disbelieve it, and I shall be set down as fanatical, and thus lose the little influence I now have." I said, "Lord, let me wait, and see if I can live it."

Within the space of perhaps ten minutes, these thoughts passed through my mind with great solemnity and great distinctness. It was a moment of struggle to me, as real as life and death. I at length perceived that I was reasoning with the Tempter. I saw I was pleading for a discretionary power to do, or not to do, my Master's will. Already my faith was losing its firm hold on Christ. I came to myself, and instantly resolved to obey at any cost. I placed back the offering of my all, which I found myself half unconsciously resuming. The vow again passed my lips; my calmness and confidence returned; and I waited for the moment; now a moment of blessed privilege, to tell what the Lord had done for my soul.

As distinctly as I remember, that, in replacing my all upon the altar, the last item of the inventory was my good name. I did now consent to become "a fool for Christ's sake." We rose from prayer, and I fully declared what God had wrought. The work was done. The Tempter assailed me no more on this point. My soul was full of peace and joy unspeakable. My cross thenceforward became my delight; my ministerial duties assumed altogether a new aspect; I loved my work. God gave me new power to testify of his grace; and with some variations of enjoyment; yet I trust in the integrity of my covenant, by the grace of God, I remain until this day. In this grace I hope to end my ministry and my life; and this alone sweetens all toil, and smooths all rough paths.

Thus have I touched upon some points of the past; and the task has been at once a blessing and a trial,-- a blessing, in that it recalls some of the most precious memories of my life, and revives with primitive freshness, the hallowed vows which today I delight to reaffirm; a trial, in that it forces me to speak of my poor self. Yet it is not of me, but of Christ, that I would speak.

“Oh! Let me into nothing fall,
As less than nothing in Thy sight,
And feel that Christ is all in all.”

Source: “Pioneer Experiences”

The Enter His Rest website.