

The Conversion of Frances Ridley Havergal (1836-1879)

A ministry of song

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With these words, Frances Ridley Havergal began her opening poem in her first published work *The Ministry of Song*, written at Oakhampton in 1867 and dedicated to the memory of her father. Much of this collection, concerning the need, duty and blessings of praise, is autobiographical and sums up the beautiful life's service of a young woman in Christ who lived through great suffering, dying of peritonitis at the early age of forty-two. By that time, her verse such as 'I am trusting thee Lord Jesus', 'Like a river glorious', 'Who is on the Lord's side', 'Take my life and let it be' and 'True-hearted, whole-hearted' had reached out evangelically worldwide and her writings had done more gospel work than many teachers, ministers and evangelists are enabled to accomplish in a long lifetime.

Born into evangelical and reformed traditions

Frances was born on 14 December, 1836, the daughter of William Henry Havergal, Rector of Astley in Worcestershire and Jane Havergal. Her parents had five other children, all born years before Frances. William Havergal was a fine evangelical preacher and lecturer but is now known chiefly for his contribution to hymnody. Jane Havergal was a deeply committed Christian who was able to lead one after the other of her children to Christ but died at the age of fifty-four without seeing her youngest child converted. Frances received her middle name from her godfather W. H. Ridley, Rector of Hambleton. Frances, called Fanny as a child, especially loved the name of Ridley which she traced back to martyr Bishop Ridley, whose courageous testimony became her life-long example. Of her middle initial Frances wrote:

But 'what the R doth represent'
I value and revere,
A diamond clasp it seems to be,
On golden chains, enlinking me
In loyal love to England's hope,
The Church I hold so dear.

Frances developed into an extraordinary beautiful and bright child. She was able to speak with clear diction and with an amazing vocabulary at two

years of age. By the time she turned three she had become an avid reader of books, her favourite place for such pastime being under the living room table. Another favourite place of learning for Frances was on her father's knee as he conducted the family's evening worship. Here she learnt many a Scripture passage and hymn from the lips of her believing father who was not only a sound exegete but, as his music to Heber's hymn From Greenland's Icy Mountains and the hymns of his daughter show, an accomplished musician. By the age of four, Frances was reading her Bible regularly, had begun to learn French and wrote in a fine, bold hand and became deeply interested in worldwide evangelism which was a pet theme of her father's. The proceeds of Mr Havergal's musical compositions invariably went to support missionary enterprises.

By the age of seven, Frances was filling her scrap and copy books with fine verse of sound insight into Christian living. Now poetry had become so much part of her nature that she found it easier to write her letters, especially to brother Frank, in verse rather than prose. Frances became very skilled in French, German, Welsh, Greek, Hebrew, Music, Literature and Art and excelled in her mother tongue though she had relatively little schooling owing chiefly to ill-health.

Recording her steps with God in poetry from childhood on

Frances kept poetic records of her childhood experiences and, in her early twenties when she found that her health was failing quickly, she began to write out a testimony of her faith for her family and dear ones. She did this because she felt, quite wrongly, that her Christian witness and fellowship had not been clear enough. As the Lord spared her for another twenty years, this 'testimony' grew into a complete autobiography so there is little of Frances Havergal's life which is unknown. At this time, Frances also began to arrange her early poetry for publication.

Frances's first deep spiritual impressions occurred at the age of six when she heard a Mr Phillpotts speaking on the fearfulness of falling into the hands of the living God. The sermon spoke to young Frances day and night for a long time, compelling her to pray for forgiveness and grace. After this and similar experiences, however, Frances often became rebellious so that she stopped praying herself and did not want adults to pray for her. But God was calling Frances, so she soon realised how she was behaving and found a place where she could be alone, read a passage of Scripture and pray for forgiveness. Reading William Cowper had also a soothing effect on the child and through him she began to understand and delight in the role of nature as a handmaid of God. Much of Frances's early autobiographical poetry is reminiscent of Cowper.

Before eleven-year-old Frances's mother died on 5 July, 1848, she told her daughter, "You are my youngest little girl, and I feel more anxious about you than the rest. I do pray for the Holy Spirit to lead you and guide you. And remember, nothing but the precious blood of Christ can make you

clean and lovely in God's sight." Then Frances's mother asked her to sing twice over:

And when her path is darkened
She lifts her trusting eye,
And says 'my Father calls me
To mansions in the sky!'

Mrs Havergal's last wish for her daughter at eight o'clock on the Sunday morning when she died, was, "Fanny dear, pray to God to prepare you for all that He is preparing for you." And, to help her daughter remember her mother's last words, Jane Havergal added, "Wherever you are, think of me". On that day Frances entered into her book of poems the words:

Eye hath not seen, nor ear hath heard,
Neither can man's heart conceive,
The blessed things God hath prepared
For those who love Him and believe.

Thus Frances's life long prayer became, "Father, prepare me to meet thee face to face," and, whenever she was in a situation which tempted her to sin, she thought of her mother who was so well prepared to enter glory, and of her advice. When teenager Frances finally found salvation in Christ, she referred back to her mother's last Sunday morning wish, writing herself at the stroke of eight one Sunday morning:

My Mother's Request.

The Sabbath morn dawns o'er the mountain brow,
And lights the earth with glory soft and mild
Oh, think'st thou, dearest mother, even now
Of me, thy youngest and most wayward child?
For this, my mother, is the sacred hour
When thou didst bid me ever think of thee
Oh, surely nothing earthly could have power
To break the spell which hallows it to me.
Thy loving look, thy feeble voice, I seem,
Though years have passed, to see and hear again.
Not as the shadowy fancies of a dream,
But as distinct, as vivid now as then.
'When in my Saviour's glorious home I dwell,
Forget not this my last request to thee
When soundeth forth the early Sabbath bell,
Where'er thou art, my Fanny, think of me!
Oh, why was this thy dying wish—thy last?
Thou would'st not think that I should e'er forget
My mother's love, that passing years might cast

A cloudy veil, where that bright star did set;
But well thou knew'st I could not think of thee
Without remembering Him with whom thou art,
To whom thou oft didst pray so fervently
That I might give my wandering, wilful heart.
I must remember too the joyful faith
Which filled thy soul e'en in thy dying hour,
And led thee calmly through the vale of death;
There I must ever see its wondrous power.
I could not but fulfil thy last desire,
The last sweet echo of thy loving voice,
Calling my mind each Sabbath morning higher,
Where thou in endless Sabbath dost rejoice.
Oft when I wavered, slipped, and nearly fell,
Yet stunned and giddy heeded not my fate,
The fatal charm was broken by that bell,
Thy memory oped my eyes ere yet too late.
And oft when sad and hopeless seemed my way,
Its sweet sound told me of the victory
Which thy bright faith hath gained, and then a ray
Of hope hath whispered, 'Such may be for thee.'
Oh, 'twas a mother's love which did devise
This gentle way of helping her child's soul;
Not on earth only, but from yon bright skies
To aid her steps towards the heavenly goal.
Oh, Thou who dwellest with Thy ransomed, where
The one long Sabbath ne'er may darkly close,
By Thy rich mercy grant this earliest prayer,
Which oft for me from her dear lips arose.
Bring me, oh, bring me to Thy house of light,
That there with my loved mother I may dwell,
And e'er rejoicing in Thy presence bright,
May praise Thy love, who doest all things well.

A great, miserable, helpless sinner prays for faith

For the next three years, however, Frances could only fear that such a meeting with God would send her to hell. Of these days and for ever afterwards, Frances could only write:

Never for one moment, even from my earliest childhood, have I ever been tempted to think otherwise of myself than as a great and miserable and helpless sinner. Never have I dared to think myself 'as good as others', for even as a little child I knew and felt the sinfulness of my own heart. Never has the shadow of a hope in my own righteousness, or of any trust in myself, crossed my mind. Yet even this I say with the reservation that it is and has been so, as far as my own conscience goes, for every year shows me more and more the utter deceitfulness of the heart: 'who can know it!'

Oh the comfort of thinking there is One who knows it, and can therefore cleanse its most hidden chambers from their dark pollution.

In 1850, a new element came into the prayers of the thirteen-year old. Frances began to pray for faith. During a six weeks' visit to her grandfather's at Wycombe with her older sister Ellen whom she called Nellie, Frances found herself going to bed early before Ellen came up the stairs so that she might pray fervently, "Oh to believe in Jesus, to believe that He had pardoned me!" Now Frances was sent to school for the first time in her life which Ellen told her was also one of the great events in anyone's life. Whilst brushing Frances's hair the night before she was to start school, Ellen, already a firm believer herself, began to tell her youngest sister of God's love and the need to believe in Him. Frances could not take this and told Ellen, "I can't love God yet, Nellie!". Nevertheless, Frances could not escape from God and she arrived at her new French-speaking boarding school in time to hear a sound sermon which moved her deeply. Indeed, throughout her first term, Frances came under the most positive influence of a Mrs Tweed who was about to retire and was praying that the Lord would crown her service with the salvation of some of her pupils. Her devout prayer was answered. As one after another of Frances's friends confessed Christ in the great movement of the Spirit which came over the school, she soon found herself saying to one of the converted girls, "Mary, dites-moi, est-ce que vous aimez Dieu?", "Why do you love God?" The young girl did not hesitate to tell Frances why. Frances broke into tears and answered that she longed to believe in and love the Saviour but could not. Then followed many secret meetings with Mary who, step by step, explained the way of salvation to her school-friend. The conversions continued as the Spirit moved in the school but Frances felt as if she were drowning and crying for help but nobody heard her. Nevertheless, she became bolder and openly questioned her Christian school friends, listening eagerly to their answers. At nights, Frances wept and prayed but still no personal answer came. On one sad day as the fourteen-year-old girl went to church and saw the sunbeams shining through a large window, she put her thoughts to paper and wrote:

Thoughts

Oh, Thou, the Sun of Righteousness,
Whose bright rays every cloud dispel,
E'en yon fair brilliance is far less
Than that wherein Thou aye dost dwell.
Oh, Thou, my precious Saviour, shine
In all Thy radiance on my soul;
Oh, let me know what love is Thine,
Oh, let me reach this long-sought goal.

To me, to me Thy glory show,
Shall ever be my earnest prayer;

Grant me to leave the things below,
And in that perfect bliss to share,
Which to Thy faithful ones is given.
Oh, let Thy glory on me beam,
And let me taste the joys of heaven,
Before the close of life's strange dream.
Soon, Lord, reveal Thyself to me;
How long must I thus sadly wait?
My spirit yearns Thyself to see,
Oh, hear me in Thy mercy great!

Learning to trust in Jesus

A bright and beautiful girl called Diana was looked on by Frances almost in awe. She was the star of the school and the envy of all the girls but she kept herself rather to herself. Frances hardly dared speak to her but noticed that she had become most troubled and then suddenly much happier. One day in December, 1850, Diana surprisingly came over to Frances at the tea table, threw her arm around her shoulder and said, "Oh Fanny, dearest Fanny, the blessing has come to me at last. Jesus has forgiven me, I know. He is my Saviour, and I am so happy! He is such a Saviour as I never imagined, so good, so loving! He has not cast me out, He said so, and He says so to you. Only come to Him and He will receive you. Even now He loves you, though you don't know it." Frances was very happy for her friend's sake but this news merely made her own lot the harder and she found herself wishing that she could lose all and suffer everything if she could only find peace with God in the Saviour's love.

By February 1851, Frances was still longing for Christ and, during a visit home because of erysipelas of the face which had damaged her eye-sight, confessed this to a Miss Cooke who was visiting the family. After hearing Frances's story, Miss Cooke assured her that she was so near to believing that her desire would be soon granted and her hope fulfilled. She added:

Why cannot you trust yourself to your Saviour at once? Supposing that now, at this moment, Christ were to come in the clouds of heaven, and take up His Redeemed, could you not trust Him? Would not His call, His promise, be enough for you? Could you not commit your soul to Him, to your Saviour Jesus?

At these words, a flash of hope and trust came into Frances's life. She wanted to be alone with the Lord and dashed upstairs to her room, flinging herself on her knees and praying fervently that the Lord would forgive her sins and create in her a new heart to love Him and serve Him. The flash of hope and trust strengthened and broadened and took hold of her entire being and Frances became ecstatic with joy as she knew and experienced that Jesus had died for her to cleanse her from all her sin and prepare her for one of His father's mansions. Frances was able now to praise God in the joy of believing.

This was also the finest introduction Frances could have had to her new mother as, shortly after this experience, William Henry Havergal asked Caroline Anne Cooke to be his wife and Mr Havergal's children were almost as delighted as he was when she accepted. Her first mother, on her death bed, had prayed that Frances would be prepared to meet Christ and her second mother had been instrumental in opening heaven's gates for her. All this is recorded in Frances Havergal's beautiful God-honouring poetry. Now Frances's testimony became:

Trusting Jesus

I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus,
Trusting only Thee;
Trusting Thee for full salvation,
Great and free.
I am trusting Thee for pardon;
At Thy feet I bow,
For Thy grace and tender mercy,
Trusting now.
I am trusting Thee for cleansing
In the crimson flood,
Trusting Thee to make me holy
By Thy blood.
I am trusting Thee to guide me;
Thou alone shalt lead!
Every day and hour supplying
All my need.
I am trusting Thee for power;
Thine can never fail!
Words which Thou Thyself shalt give me,
Must prevail.
I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus
Never let me fall!
I am trusting Thee for ever,
And for all.

Splendid to be so near the gates of heaven

One day Frances's doctor said "Good-bye, I shall not see you again" and Frances said, "Do you really think I am going?" The doctor replied that she would probably die that day. Frances looked up smiling and said, "Beautiful, too good to be true! Splendid to be so near the gates of heaven!" She was then heard to repeat several times, "So beautiful to go!" She then asked her brother Frank to sing Jerusalem, my happy home to their father's tune St Chrysostom, mentioning a particular verse she would like added. After Frank had sung, Frances exclaimed, "Oh, it is the Lord Jesus that is so dear to me, I can't tell how precious! how much He has been to me!" A visiting minister then asked Frances if Jesus were with her. Her reply was, "Of course! It's splendid! I thought He would have left me here a long while; but He is so good to take me now It is all perfect peace, I am only waiting for Jesus to take me in." When a lady-friend came in to say good-bye, Frances whispered, "There is no bottom to God's mercy and love; all His promises are true, not one thing has failed." In great pain, Frances prayed several times, "Come, Lord Jesus, come and fetch me; oh, run, run." Then she whispered the names of many dear ones and said, "I want all to come to me in heaven; oh, don't disappoint me, tell them 'Trust Jesus.'" Then Frances was overcome by convulsive sickness, after which she said, "There, now it is all over! Blessed rest!" She then suddenly looked up steadfastly as if in ecstasy and gazed like this for almost ten minutes with great joy on her face. She then seemed about to sing. The word 'He' came clearly from her lips and then Frances suddenly died. She had gone where she could live out more exactly the words of her great hymn of praise:

"Worthy of all adoration
Is the Lamb that one was slain."
Cry, in raptured exultation,
His redeemed from every nation;
Angel myriads join the strain;
Sounding from their sinless strings
Glory to the king of kings;
Harping, with their harps of gold,
Praise which never can be told.
Hallelujahs full and swelling
Prise around His throne of might.
All our highest laud excelling,
Holy and Immortal, dwelling
In the unapproachèd light,
He is worthy to receive
All that heaven and earth can give.
Blessing, honour, glory, might,
All are His by glorious right.
As the sound of many waters
Let the full Amen arise!
Hallelujah! Ceasing never,

Sounding through the great For Ever,
Linking all its harmonies;
Through eternities of bliss,
Lord, our rapture shall be this;
And our endless life shall be
One Amen of praise to Thee!

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