

My Spiritual Autobiography

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As I had the happiness of being born of believing parents, I imbibed the sound doctrines of the Gospel from my infancy; nor was I without touches of heart, checks of conscience, and meltings of affections, by the secret strivings of God's Spirit within me while very young; but the impressions were not deep, nor the influences lasting, being frequently defaced and quenched by the vanities and vices of childhood and youth.

About the twenty-first year of my age I began to be under great anxiety concerning my soul. The spirit of bondage distressed me sore; though I endeavoured (as I believe most under legal convictions do) to commend myself to God's favour by amendment of life, virtuous resolutions, moral rectitude, and a strict attendance on religious ordinances. I strove to subdue my flesh by fasting, and other rigorous acts of penance and mortification; and whenever I was captivated by its lusts (which indeed was often the case) I endeavoured to reconcile myself again to God by sorrow for my faults, which, if attended with tears, I hoped would pass as current coin with heaven; and then I judged myself whole again, and to stand on equal terms with my foes, till the next fall, which generally succeeded in a short time.

In this uneasy, restless round of sinning and repenting, working and dreading, I went on for above seven years; when, a great domestic affliction befalling me (in which I was a moderate sufferer, but a monstrous sinner), I began to sink deeper and deeper into conviction of my nature's evil, the deceitfulness and hardness of my heart, the wickedness of my life, the shallowness of my Christianity, and the blindness of my devotion. I saw that I was in a dangerous state, and that I must have a better religion than I had yet experienced before I could with any propriety call myself a Christian. How did I now long to feel the merits of Christ applied to my soul by the Holy Spirit! How often did I make my strongest efforts to call God, my God! But, alas, I could no more do this than I could raise the dead! I found now, by woeful experience, that faith was not in my power; and the question with me now was, not whether I would be a Christian or no; but whether I might: not whether I should repent and believe; but whether God would give me true repentance and a living faith.

After some weeks passed in this gloomy, dreadful state, the Lord was pleased to comfort me a little, by enabling me to appropriate, in some measure, the merits of the Saviour to my own soul. This comfort increased for some time; and my understanding was also wonderfully illuminated in

reading the Holy Scriptures, so that I could see Christ in many passages where before I little imagined to find Him, and was encouraged to hope I had an interest in His merits and the benefits by Him procured to His people.

In this blessed state my continuance was but short; for rushing impetuously into notions beyond my experience, I hasted to make myself a Christian by mere doctrine, adopting other men's opinions before I had tried them; and set up for a great light in religion, disregarding the internal work of grace begun in my soul by the Holy Ghost. This liberty, assumed by myself, and not given by Christ, soon grew to libertinism; in which I took large progressive strides, and advanced to a dreadful height, both in principle and practice. In a word, I ran such dangerous lengths both of carnal and spiritual wickedness, that I even outwent professed infidels, and shocked the irreligious and profane with my horrid blasphemies and monstrous impieties. Hardness of heart was, with me, a sign of good confidence; carelessness went for trust, empty notions for great light, a seared conscience for assurance of faith, and rash presumption for Christian courage.

My actions were in a great measure conformable to my notions; for, having (as I imagined) obtained by Christ a liberty of sinning, I was resolved to make use of it; and thought the more I could sin without remorse, the greater hero I was in faith. A tender conscience I deemed weakness; prayer I left for novices and bigots; and a broken and contrite heart was a thing too low and legal for me to approve, much more to desire. Not to dwell on particulars, I shall only say (what, though shocking to hear, is too true), that I committed 'all uncleanness with greediness'.

In this abominable state I continued, a loose backslider, an audacious apostate, a bold-faced rebel, for nine or ten years, but infecting others with the poison of my delusions. I published several pieces on different subjects, chiefly translations of the ancient heathens; to which I prefixed prefaces and subjoined notes of a pernicious tendency; and indulged a freedom of thought far unbecoming a Christian. But God, who is rich in mercy, and whose grace is, like Himself, almighty, did not altogether give me up to hardness and impenitence; I felt, from time to time, meltings of heart, and inward compunction; and had a secret hope at the bottom (which often rose above my gross corruptions) that I should not always go on in this abandoned manner, and run as reprobate to final perdition.

About seven or eight years ago I began by degrees to reform a little, and to live in a more sober and orderly manner. And now, as I retained the form of sound words, and held the doctrines of free grace, justification by faith, and other orthodox tenets, I was tolerably confident of the goodness of my state; especially as I could now also add that other requisite, a moral behaviour. Surely, thought I, though I have been so profligate and profane, yet, as I am now reclaimed, and am not only sound in principles, but sober and honest in practice, I cannot but be in the right way to the favour of God.

For several years I went on in this easy, cool, smooth, and indolent manner, with a lukewarm, insipid kind of religion, yet not without some secret whispers of God's love, and visitations of His grace, and now and then warm addresses to Him in private prayer. But, alas, all this while my heart was whole; the fountains of the great deeps of my sinful nature were not broken up! I was therefore conscious that the written word of God was against me, especially those parts of it that represent the children of God as a poor, afflicted, mourning, broken-hearted people; of which characteristics I was destitute; nor was the blood of Christ effectually applied to my soul. I looked on His death indeed as the grand sacrifice for sin; and always thought on Him with respect and reverence; but did not see the inestimable value of His blood and righteousness clearly enough to make me abhor myself, and count all things else but dung and dross. On the contrary, when I used to read the Scriptures (which I now did constantly, both in English and the original languages), though my mind was often affected, and my understanding illuminated, by many passages that treated of the Saviour; yet I was so far from seeing or owning that there was such a necessity for His death, and that it could be of such infinite value as is represented, that I have often resolved (oh, the horrible depths of man's fall, and the desperate wickedness of the human heart!), that I never would believe it; and have been tempted to tell God Himself that He could not make me, without injuring my reason, and imposing on my understanding by downright violence and perverse power.

About three or four years ago I fell into a deep despondency of mind, because I had never experienced grand revelations and miraculous discoveries. I was very melancholy, and shunned all company, walking pensively alone, or sitting in private, and bewailing my sad and dark condition, not having a friend in the world to whom I could communicate the burden of my soul; which was so heavy, that I sometimes hesitated even to take my necessary food. But after many a gloomy doleful hour spent in solitude and sorrow, not without strong and frequent cries and tears to God, and beseeching Him to reveal Himself to me in a clearer manner, I thought He asked me, in the midst of one of my prayers, whether I rather chose the visionary revelations of which I had formed some wild idea, or to be content with trusting to the low, despised mystery of a crucified man? I was enabled to prefer the latter; and felt great comfort in expecting the future effects of my choice.

But gloom of mind and dejection of spirit still frequently overwhelmed me;

from which I used to be relieved by pouring out my soul to Christ, and beseeching Him, with cries and groans and tears, to reveal Himself to me; praying at the same time it might be done without pain; for I was so much a coward, that I preferred ease to every other consideration. I was often answered by such portion of Scripture as these: 'Behold, I come quickly; and My reward is with me.' That which thou hast already hold fast till I come.' To the latter of these I closed my hands fast, and cried, I would sooner part with every drop of blood than let go the hopes I already had in a crucified Saviour; and to the former I used to reply (after considering the words, 'My reward is with Me'), 'Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.' For, though I expected sore visitation, yet believing that Christ would bring strength and power with Him, I waited, and longed for His coming.

The week before Easter, 1757, I had such an amazing view of the agony of Christ in the garden, as I know not well how to describe. I was lost in wonder and adoration; and the impression it made was too deep, I believe, ever to be obliterated. I shall say no more of this; but only remark that, notwithstanding all that is talked about the sufferings of Jesus, none can know anything of them but by the Holy Ghost; and I believe he that knows most, knows but very little. It was upon this I made the first part of Hymn 1, On the Passion; which, however, I afterwards mutilated and altered.

I used to be often terribly cut down with those words, 'And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 25:30); which sometimes sunk me almost to utter despair; and then again I used to receive some comfort. At length despair began to make dreadful head against me; hopes grew fainter, and terrors stronger; which latter were increased by a faithful letter I received from a friend, who had also run great lengths of impiety with me formerly, but was now reclaimed. The convictions I now laboured under were not like those legal convictions I had formerly felt, but far worse, horrible beyond expression. I looked on myself as a gospel sinner; one that had trampled under the foot the blood of Jesus, and for whom there remained no more sacrifice for sin. I shall not enlarge here, choosing rather to suppress than exaggerate; as I do not lay stress on my own sufferings, or those of any other man, except the Man Christ Jesus; but surely what I felt was very grievous, for so deep was my despair, that I found in me a kind of wish that I might only be damned with the common damnation of transgressors of God's law. But, oh! I thought the hottest place in hell must be my portion. All the evangelical promises were so far from comforting me, that they were my greatest tormentors, because they would only increase my condemnation.

This distress and anguish of soul was likewise attended with great infirmity of body. One morning I was waked with intolerable pain, as if balls of fire were burning my reins. Amidst this excruciating torture, which lasted near an hour, one of the first things I thought on was the pierced body of Jesus, and what pain of body, as well as soul, He underwent. Soon after this very stroke, I was seized in the evening with a cold shivering, which I concluded

to be the icy damp of death, and that after that must come everlasting damnation. In this condition I went to my bed, but dared not close my eyes, even when nature was overcharged, lest I should awake in hell.

While these horrors remained, I used to run backwards and forwards to places of religious worship, especially to the Tabernacle in Moorfields, the Chapel in Tottenham Court Road, where indeed I received some comfort, which, though little, was then highly prized, because greatly needed; but in the general almost every thing served only to condemn me, to make me rue my own backslidings, and envy those children of God who had continued to walk honestly ever since their first conversion. Notions of religion I wanted no man to teach me: I had doctrine enough, but found by woeful experience, that dry doctrine, though ever so sound, will not sustain a soul in the day of trial.

In this sad state I went moping about (and that I could, was next to a miracle), having some little hope at the bottom under all, which now and then would glimmer, but was soon overwhelmed again with clouds of horror, till Whit-Sunday, 1757, when I happened to go in the afternoon to the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane, where I had been several times before. The minister preached on these words, 'Because thou hast kept the words of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth' (Rev. iii. 10). Though the text, and most of what was said on it, seemed to make greatly against me, yet I listened with much attention, and felt myself deeply impressed by it. When it was over, I thought of hastening to Tottenham Court Chapel; but presently altering my mind, returned to my own house.

I was hardly got home when I felt myself melting away into a strange softness of affection, which made me fling myself on my knees before God. My horrors were immediately dispelled, and such light and comfort flowed into my heart as no words can paint. The Lord by His Spirit of love came, not in a visionary manner into my brain, but with such divine power and energy into my soul, that I was lost in blissful amazement. I cried out, 'What me, Lord?' His Spirit answered in me, 'Yes, thee.' I objected, 'But I have been so unspeakably vile and wicked.' The answer was, 'I pardon thee fully and freely. Thy own goodness (for I had now set about a thorough amendment, if peradventure I might be spared) cannot save thee, nor shall thy wickedness damn thee. I undertake to work all thy works in thee and for thee; and to bring thee safe through all.' The alteration I then felt in my soul was as sudden and palpable as that which is experienced by a person staggering, and almost sinking, under a burden, when it is immediately taken from his shoulders. Tears ran in streams from my eyes for a considerable while; and I was so swallowed up in joy and thankfulness, that I hardly knew where I was. I threw my soul willingly into my Saviour's hands; lay weeping at His feet, wholly resigned to His will, and only begging that I might, if He was graciously pleased to permit it, be of some service to His Church and people.

Thenceforth I enjoyed sweet peace in my soul; and had such clear and frequent manifestations of His love to me, that I longed for no other heaven. My horrors were banished, and have not, I think, returned since with equal violence. And though I can see little signs as yet of His granting my request concerning usefulness; [This was written before the Author's call to the ministry.] though I am very barren of good, and full of evil; though I have many sore trials and temptation in my soul; yet it pleases the Lord to reveal Himself often in me, to open the mysteries of His cross, and give me to trust in His precious blood.

Not long after this my – shall I call it reconversion? – I was terribly infested with thoughts so monstrously obscene and blasphemous, that they cannot be spoken, nor so much as hinted; and I believe such as hardly ever entered into the heart of any other man; though I am sensible that most of God's children are sometimes attacked in like manner; but mine were foul and black beyond example, and seemed to be the masterpieces of hell. They haunted me some months; and used to make me weep bitterly, and cry earnestly to my God to remove them; which at last He was pleased to do in a great measure; though they would often be return still, like intruding visitants, but are not permitted to come with much power. In short, I feel myself now as poor, as weak, as helpless and dependent as ever; but now my weakness is my greatest strength; I now rejoice, though I rejoice with trembling.

I soon began to be visited by God's Spirit in a different manner from what I had ever felt before. I had constant communion with Him in prayer. His sufferings, His wounds, His agonies of soul were impressed upon me in an amazing manner. I now believed my name was sculptured deep in the Lord

Jesus' breast with character never to be erased. I saw Him with the eye of faith, stooping under the load of my sins; groaning and grovelling in Gethsemane for me. The incarnate God was more and more revealed to me; and I had far other notions of His sufferings than I had entertained before. Now I saw that the grief of Christ was the grief of my Maker; that His wounds were the wounds of the Almighty God; and the least drop of His blood now appeared to me more valuable than ten thousands of worlds. As I had before thought His sufferings too little, they now appeared to me to be too great; and I often cried out in transports of blissful astonishment, 'Lord, 'tis too much, 'tis too much; surely my soul was not worth so great a price.' I had also such a spirit of sympathetic love to the Lord Jesus given me, that after I had left off to sorrow for myself, for some months I grieved and mourned bitterly for Him. I looked on Him whom I had pierced, and felt such sharp compunction, mixed at the same time with so much compassion, that the pain and the pleasure I experienced, are much better felt than expressed.

Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, is now the only thing I desire to know. In that incarnate mystery are contained all the rich treasures of divine wisdom. This is the mark towards which I am still pressing forward. This is the cup of salvation, of which I wish to drink deeper and deeper. This is the knowledge in which I long to grow; and desire at the same time a daily increase in all true grace and godliness. All duties, means, ordinances, etc. are to me then only rich, when they are enriched with the blood of the Lamb, in comparison of which all things else are but chaff and husks.

Pharisaic zeal, and Antinomian security, are the two engines of Satan, with which he grinds the Church in all ages, as betwixt the upper and the nether millstone. The space between them is much narrower and harder to find than most men imagine. It is a path which the vulture's eye hath not seen; and none can show it us but the Holy Ghost. Here let no one trust the directions of his own heart, or of any other man; lest by being warned to shun the one, he be dashed against the other. The distinction is too fine for man to discern, therefore let the Christian ask direction of his God. These two hideous monsters continually worry and perplex my soul; nor is the former, though appearing in a holier shape, one whit less, but (if possible) more odious to me than the latter. Therefore, from the wonderful dealings of God towards me, I endeavour to draw the following observations.

On the one hand I would observe, that it is 'not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God which sheweth mercy.'

That none can make a Christian but He that made the world. That is the glory of God to bring good out of evil.

That whom He loveth, He loveth unto the end.

That though all men seek, more or less, to recommend themselves to God's favour by their works, yet 'to him that worketh not, but believeth on Him

that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.’

That the blood of the Redeemer, applied to the soul by His Spirit, is the one thing needful.

That prayer is the task and labour of a Pharisee, but the privilege and delight of a Christian.

That God grants not the requests of His people because they pray; but they pray because He designs to answer their petitions.

That self-righteousness and legal holiness rather kept the soul from, than draw it to, Christ.

That they, who seek salvation by them, pursue shadows, mistake the great end of the law, and err from the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

That God’s design is to glorify His Son alone, and to debase the excellency of every creature.

That no righteousness besides the righteousness of Jesus (that is, the righteousness of God) is of any avail towards acceptance.

That to be a moral man, a zealous man, a devout man, is very short of being a Christian.

That the eye of faith looks more to the blood of Jesus than to the soul’s victory over corruptions.

That the dealings of God with His people, though similar in the general, are nevertheless so various, that there is no chalking out the paths of one child of God to those of another; no laying down regular plans of Christian conversion, Christian experience, Christian usefulness, or Christian conversation.

That the will of God is the only standard of right and good.

That the sprinkling of the blood of a crucified Saviour on the conscience by the Holy Ghost sanctifies a man, without which, the most abstemious life and rigorous discipline is unholy.

Lastly, that faith and holiness, with every other blessing, are the purchase of the Redeemer’s blood, and that He has a right to bestow them on whom He will, in such a manner and in such a measure as He thinks best; though the spirit in all men lusteth to envy.

On the other hand, I would observe,

That it is not so easy to be a Christian as some men seem to think. That for a living soul really to trust in Christ alone, when he sees nothing in himself but evil and sin, is an act as supernatural as for Peter to walk the sea.

That mere doctrine, though ever so sound, will not alter the heart; consequently that to turn from one set of tenets to another, is not Christian conversion.

That as much as Lazarus coming out of his grave, and feeling himself restored to life, differed from those who only saw the miracle, or believed the fact when told them, so great is the difference between a soul's real coming out of himself, and having the righteousness of Christ imputed to him by the precious faith of God's elect, and a man's bare believing the doctrine of imputed righteousness because he sees it contained in Scripture, or assenting to the truth of it when proposed to his understanding by others. That a whole-hearted disciple can have but little communion with a broken-hearted Lord.

That 'if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His.' That a prayerless spirit is not the Spirit of Christ, but that prayer to a Christian is as necessary and as natural as food to a natural man.

That the usual way of going to heaven is through much tribulation. That the sinner who is drawn to Christ is not he that has learnt that he is a sinner by head knowledge, but that feels himself such by heart contrition.

That he that believeth, hath an unction from the Holy One.

That a true Christian is as vitally united to Christ as my hand or foot to my body; consequently suffers and rejoices with Him.

That a believer talks and converses with God.

That a dead faith can no more cherish the soul than a dead corpse can perform the functions of life.

That where there is true faith there will be obedience and the fear of God.

That he that lives by the faith of the Son of God, eateth His flesh and drinketh His blood.

That 'he that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.'

That many imagine themselves great believers, who have little or no true faith at all; and many who deem themselves void of faith, cleave to Christ by the faith of the operation of God.

That faith, like gold, must be tried in the fire before it can be safely depended on. Lastly, that Christians are sealed by the Holy Ghost to the day of redemption; and to this seal they trust their eternal welfare, not to naked knowledge, or speculative notions, though ever so deep.

They dread to dream they are rich, when they are blind and poor; to have a name to live, and yet be dead; or to be forced to fly for precarious refuge to the conjectural scheme of universal salvation, with those who hope to be saved because they think there will be none lost.

For my own part, I confess myself a sinner still, and though I am not much tempted to outward gross acts of iniquity, yet inward corruptions and spiritual wickedness continually harass and perplex my soul, and often make me cry out, 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' From me they are not yet removed; though I once hoped, with many others, that I should soon get rid of them. All I can do is to look to Jesus through them all; cling fast to His wounded side; long to be clothed with His righteousness; pray Him to plead my cause against these spiritual enemies that rise up against me; and though I feel myself leprous from head to foot, believe that I am clean through the word which He hath spoken unto me. In short, I rejoice, not because the spirits are always subject to me (for, alas! I find they are often too strong for me to control), but because my name is written in heaven.

I am daily more and more convinced that the promises of God to His people are absolute; and desire to build my hopes on the free electing love of God in Christ Jesus to my soul before the world began, which I can experimentally and feelingly say, He hath delivered me from the lowest hell. He hath plucked me as a brand out of the fire. Though my ways were dreadfully dangerous to the last degree, His eye was all along upon me for good. He hath excited me to love much, by forgiving me much. He hath shewed me, and still daily shews me, the abominable deceit, lust, enmity and pride of my heart, and the inconceivable depths of His mercy; how far I was fallen, and how much it cost Him of sweat and blood to bring me up. He hath proved Himself stronger than I, and His goodness superior to all my unworthiness. He gives me to know and to feel too, that without Him I can do nothing. He tells me (and He enables me to believe it) that I am all fair, and there is no spot in me. Though an enemy, He calls me His friend; though a traitor, His child; though a beggared prodigal, He clothes me with the best robe, and has put a ring of endless love and mercy on my hand. And though I am often sorely distressed by spiritual internal foes, afflicted, tormented, and bowed down almost to death, with the sense of my own present barrenness, ingratitude, and proneness to evil, He secretly shews me His bleeding wounds; and softly, but powerfully, whispers to my soul, 'I am thy great salvation.'

His free, distinguishing grace is the bottom on which is fixed the rest of my poor, weary, tempted soul. On this I ground my hope, oftentimes when unsupported by any other evidence, only by the Spirit of adoption received

from Him. He hath chosen me out from everlasting, in whom to make known the inexhaustible riches of His free grace and long-suffering. Though I am a stranger to others, and a wonder to myself, yet I know Him, or rather, am known of Him. Though poor in myself, I am rich enough in Him. When my dry, empty, barren soul is parched with thirst, He kindly bids me come to Him, and drink my fill at the fountain head. In a word, He empowers me to say, with experimental evidence, 'Where sin abounded, grace doth much more abound.'

Amen and amen.

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