

1 John 5:1 (R.H.) 51349

Things New and Old: Volume 28, My Awakening, My Quickening, My Sealing and My Deliverance (5:1)

In August 1849 I completed my twenty-first year. I cannot recall a single religious impression previous to that period. I was not grossly immoral—disposed rather to pride myself on my morality: but I was entirely godless: God was not in all my thoughts. I mingled little with men, and so knew little of the infidelity of the day, yet I was infidel at heart: I had an infidelity of my own, one of its leading features was a vapory idea of the grandeur of man.

The first religious impression I can recall, was about two months after the above date: I had caught a bad cold, and one night after I had gone to bed, the thought arose in my mind, What if this cold were to settle on my lungs, and I were to die? I tried to shake it off, but it stuck by me for a time and made me uncomfortable, till I dropped off to sleep. In the morning I awoke better, and it was forgotten.

It was the custom of my father's house to dine early on Lord's days, after which my habit was, in summer, to spend the afternoons out on a rocky knoll, on a hill side, in the midst of a plantation of spruces, where, with a panorama before me, and but rarely interrupted, I could be alone with my thoughts and my book; in colder weather, I spent them by the fireside in my own room, which was in a little cottage detached from the house.

It must have been on the first or second Lord's day after my cold, that on rising from dinner, I went to a book case to select a book. Side by side with my favorite Shakespeare stood five duodecimo volumes of Dwight's "Theology." For years they had stared me in the face, and their title was quite familiar, but I had never dreamed of looking within, nor, I believe, had any one in the household. How they came there I never knew, but they had a mission from God. My hand was raised to take down a volume of Shakespeare, when something within whispered, "Take that other." I threw the thought from me, but it returned, and after a few minutes of inward strife I carried off the first volume of Dwight. The hand of God was upon me.

I sat down in my chamber, before the fire, opened the book, and began to read an argumentative discourse on the existence of God, but little fitted, one would have said, for the conversion of a soul; yet it was God's word for me.

Deistical in my thoughts I had long been, but I had never questioned the existence of God. Now, however, from a dreamy idea, He seemed to become to me all at once a living reality—a personal Being, with whom I had to do; and I soon found myself on my knees before Him. For what I asked I have no recollection, but I went on reading and praying from day to day: I was thoroughly awake now, and in earnest for salvation.

How many days thereafter I cannot now say, nor what the direct agency, but never shall I forget the impressions that filled my soul when it first came home to me that there was a Man in the glory of God; that the Son of the Eternal had really taken humanity upon Him, had lived, died, risen, and ascended into heaven, and sat down on the throne. It was like the rising of the sun on midnight darkness; my soul reveled for a season in the glory of the thought, whose grandeur shone out for me all the more vividly against the dark background of my previous dreams of human greatness. I now for the first time saw where the human greatness was. I believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Savior, the Son of God. Scripture has since taught me that I must then have been born of God. (1 John 5:1.)

That salvation was through Christ, and only-through Him, had now become for me a certainty, but I was far as yet from seeing it mine in Him. I still thought that my doings, and above all my repentance, had a part to play in the matter of my personal salvation—with the application of His salvation to me—all was yet misty; and the grand effort of my soul became to repent of the past, and to live well for the future. I wanted above all things to feel repentant: I thought if it were real in me, I should weep over my sins, and I tried hard (thank God, in vain) to wring tears from my tearless eyes. Had I been allowed to shed one tear, I might have rested on my repentance instead of Christ. What mercy in that which then appeared to me so sad!

I went forward at once, and partook of the weekly "sacrament," and in the course of the next week called on the bishop under whose teaching I then sat with my parents, to ask counsel of him. I was advised to go home, take a sheet of paper, write down all my sins, and repent of them! How little thought that dear man, any more than myself, how he was then helping the devil! How little he knew what that delusive counsel might have cost my soul, but for the grace—the free, sovereign grace of God.

I attempted to follow out his advice, but I had not half covered the page of foolscap before me, when the conviction of the hopelessness of the task caused me to lay down the pen, and sent me again to my knees and my efforts.

It must have been somewhere in the second or third week of my soul exercise, that, as I was kneeling one evening beside a chair, pleading for pardon, and striving after feeling, there flashed into my soul the thought, "What am I doing? God says He forgives sins for Christ's sake, and here am I trying to wring it out of His hand by my repentance." It was light from on high. My prayers were instantly turned into praises. My load was gone. I knew my sins were forgiven. My soul was at peace. The child looked up into his Father's face and knew his Father. I do not know whether I then used the words "Abba! Father!" but perfectly well do I recollect that the Fatherly character of God took then, and held ever after, a prominent place in my soul. The name acquired for me then, as it has ever since retained, an inexpressible sweetness; I delighted to repeat it over and over. Night after night I went out into the open air, like a bird let loose, and in the solitude of the midnight, skipped and leaped rather than walked along the road for hours, gazing delightfully up into the starry heavens, with the thought that these were all my Father's; that He had made them all, and that He dwelt above there, and filled all things, and yet cared for and loved me! and I poured out my joyous soul in praises and prayers and thanksgivings.

Besides the scriptures I read other books; among them I recall specially, Pike's "Early Piety;" but Dwight was my pocket companion: he was in danger of becoming an idol. My first quarrel with him was when I came to his thoughts on "Assurance." He made that an attainment, and a rare one—a something to grow out of a long life of piety, and a watchful self-scrutiny; while I, a mere neophyte, felt it in my soul, fresh and clear and bright, from God and from His word. Christ had by that time become too precious, and His work (though still in many ways hazy) too clearly my foundation for that teaching: Dwight lost authority over me. From that day to the present, my assurance has never wavered. Much and sadly have my experiences tossed to and fro; but that was always as a rock rising above the surface of the waves: it was Christ.

Equally vivid is my recollection of my first conflict, at an earlier day, with the doctrine of works. I had not yet got clearly from the word the true place of these, and, while knowing I had the forgiveness of sins, I still supposed my works had something to do with my continual preservation and final security; but I well remember the thought, that however needful my works might be, I had found a higher and nobler motive to serve God, in the debt of love and gratitude arising out of what He had done for me in Christ, and that should be henceforth my motive. The heart was in advance of the head. It was some time before I got it clear doctrinally. I had to reach it in the very teeth of the oral teaching I was under.

Another thing was, that all fear of death had at once and forever disappeared: I longed to depart and be with Christ; a longing that never left me till I laid it down long, long after, in view of the privilege of living for Him here, and exchanged it for the blessed hope of His coming. In those early days, I felt and could not but compare myself to a balloon, tugging and straining to rise, but still bound to earth by cords that only needed to be severed in order to allow its soaring upwards. I felt that I belonged to heaven and to God.

Alas! it was not long ere the presence of the evil within made itself felt, and sorely, sorely it perplexed and harassed me, for I did not understand it; and two-and-twenty weary years of fruitless effort to better the flesh, intervened before deliverance came. Oh! the buffetings, the hopelessness—many times, the anguish—of those years. Peace with God I had: it was never broken, though communion often, often was. Assurance I had, and it never wavered, even though failure made me groan as under bondage. It was not salvation I wanted: I had it, and I knew I had it. I knew I had eternal life; and though I did not understand I should not come into judgment, I did know I should not come into condemnation—that there was none for me. I had no terrors, no fears, no misgivings as to the future; it was the present that tortured me: it was present holiness I wanted; it was power over sin, only that I had no other idea of that than its extinction. What I groaned over was, the grinding that when I would do good evil was present with me, and that, while delighting in the law of God after the inward man, a law in my members brought me into subjection. I was two-and-twenty years in Rom. 7. I tried at times to persuade myself that chapter was Paul's experience, and ought therefore to be mine; but it would not do; and the painful feeling uppermost in my mind was, that there was something out of joint. I well remember speaking of it once to one with whom I was associated in service to the Lord, and telling him that nothing but the unshaken conviction I had of the gospel being of God, and that therefore the fault must be somewhere in myself, kept down the bitter feeling that it had disappointed my hopes: I had looked to be bettered inwardly, while I felt that my heart was not a whit better after twenty years of experience, than on the day of my conversion. I was assured in reply that it was not my heart that was still as bad, but my spiritual perceptions of evil that were more acute; but I knew that was not the answer to the facts, and I could only groan on.

The "Holiness by Faith" doctrine attracted me, as promising to meet my need, but I found that all it had to offer me was holiness "up to the measure of each day's consciousness." I felt that was but a lowering of the standard; it would not do for God.

When I first heard of the doctrine of the two natures, I turned eagerly towards it, and meeting with one who had written on it, and was supposed to understand it, I hoped and asked for light. He took up two books, and, holding one in his left hand said, "This is the old nature, and this (placing the other on top) is the new; and it is the business of this to keep that down." It was evident to me that if that were so, then the sinlessness claimed for the new nature must be unreal, for it was admitted it might fail to keep the other down, and what was that failure but sin on the part of the new nature, if it were its business or responsibility to restrain the old? I elicited no satisfactory explanation. Now, was he wrong in claiming sinlessness for the new nature? Assuredly not; 1 John 3:9 settles that; but he was all wrong in laying the responsibility on the nature instead of on the individual: responsibility is in the person, not in the nature: it is "I," the man, whose business it is, in the power of the Holy Ghost, not to walk after the flesh—not in the old nature, but in the new. It was thus that an erroneous presentation of an important truth repelled me from the truth itself, and it was not till seven or eight years later, that, along with other correlative truths, I learned that the solution of the problem that had so long perplexed me was, that I had in me two opposing natures; the one incurably bad, the other holy and sinless; and that I had been toiling away in the effort to effect what God, in Rom. 8:7, has pronounced an impossible thing—the bringing of the carnal mind, the evil nature, into subjection to the law of God! No wonder I failed and was disheartened.

Once I had learned with the apostle, or with him whom he personifies, that it was as having in me two opposing natures that "with the mind I myself served the law of God, but with the flesh, the law of sin," failure became intelligible, and I understood, with him, that it was deliverance I needed from the one, in order that I might walk in the other—deliverance, not improvement. Then came the discovery that power over evil was not a change to be wrought in me, so long vainly hoped for; nor a deposit or store of imparted strength within, in whose power to act; but Christ—"Christ the power of God"—a power external to myself, "the power of Christ to rest upon me;" Christ making perfect His strength in my weakness; strengthening with might by His Spirit in the inner man. It was not myself made strong in myself, and so taken out of the place of dependence, as it were; but, while still powerless in myself, enabled to do all things through Christ which strengthened, and that, as "strengthened with all might according to the power of his glory," and so kept hanging on Him continually; faith bringing Him in to meet every recurring need as presented; its practical daily lesson, how to use Him as power—how to know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death; and all in the energy of that divine Spirit, who, as the law of the life in Christ Jesus, has made me free from the law (or principle) of sin and death.

It was not the end of conflict, but, I bless God it was the end of bondage. It was not that the flesh had ceased to lust against the Spirit, but that the character of the conflict was now understood, and the source of victory known: Christ and His power resting in one; its expression that walk in the Spirit enjoined in Gal. 5, as in the sense of dependent weakness, Christ is looked to and leant on: not opus operatum action of doctrine or truth even, but Christ acting by His Spirit in positive divine delivering power on the soul. I can tell of no experiences at this point, at all akin to what has been termed "second conversion," any more than I can speak of any so-called "sinless perfection;" all I can say is, that I know the truth, and the truth has made me free.

To God be the praise! to Christ be the glory! it is grace, grace, grace, from first to last.

I may add here that in relation to the law, my thoughts (save in the earlier months when yet unformed) were those generally held by the “evangelical” Christians whom I eventually found myself thrown with. I had no fear of the law. I reckoned myself quite outside its judicial jurisdiction. My salvation, my justification, my acceptance, I never for a moment supposed in any way dependent on my keeping it; but with the usual inconsistency, I held to and spoke of it as my “rule of life”—the rule for the regulation of my conduct—though really with another inconsistency, Christ rather than it, was long before my soul as the standard, my non-attainment to which so deeply harassed me. My views on this found so clear an expression in a hymn which, near the middle of the period, I wrote in Portuguese, that I have made and append here a translation, which reproduces pretty faithfully the thought.

For the grace, the love, the mercy, the long-suffering, the patience, and the wisdom that have displayed themselves throughout the five-and-thirty years of my christian pilgrimage, I would eternally bless my Father-God, and my gracious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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