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HOW THEY ENTERED CANAAN
(A Collection of Holiness Experience Accounts)
Compiled by Duane V. Maxey

Vol. I -- Named Accounts

WILLIAM FERGUSON
(One of Wesley's Preachers)
1735 -- 1???

My father and mother lived at Kelso, in Scotland, where they had five children. But when my mother was big with the sixth, she could not be delivered, the child being dead within her. In a desperate case a desperate method was used; incision was made, and the child was taken out of her side. And yet, by the blessing of God she survived, and recovered her health and strength. But the physician assured her, if she had another child it could not be born, but she must infallibly die. However she was with child again: as the time of delivery approached, expecting nothing but death, she cried to God day and night. But to the amazement of all, she was delivered with more ease than she had ever been of any child before.

I was the child then born, on the 25th of March, 1735. I was brought up a Presbyterian, and had very early impressions on my soul. When I was about six years old, I used to wonder I could not weep under sermons as others did. I left off play, and going into the fields, used to think of God, of the devil, of heaven, and hell. I thought God loved me, and was willing to bring me to heaven. But I thought if the devil should get me to hell, I shall never get out. Yet I thought Christ suffered for my sins; and thereby made a full atonement for them. But although I knew these great truths yet my heart was unchanged; and I constantly went on in the follies of childhood, according to the device of my own heart.

When I was ten years old, my parents removed to Eysmouth, eight miles north of Berwick: here I grew thoughtful again, and began to pray much, wherein I found so great pleasure that I persuaded four boys I was acquainted with, to go with me, morning and evening, into a secret place in a timber yard, between two stacks of deals, where we prayed one after the other. This we constantly did for two months: but a young gentleman lodged just by, whose window looked into the yard: observing us to go thither constantly, he wanted to know the reason. And meeting me one day alone, after giving me many good words, he asked me why we met together between the stacks? I told him, but begged him not to tell any one; which he faithfully promised. But notwithstanding he went immediately and told the children themselves and their parents, and the

people of the town; many of whom cried out, "That is blasphemy for such young children to pretend to pray." The children were soon laughed out of their religion, and never rested till they made me like themselves; nay, till they taught me to get drunk, which we did in that very place where we used to pray together.

Two years after, my parents removed to Holy Island, nine miles south of Berwick. The people of this place were mostly smugglers, and the children remarkably wicked. Of these I soon learned to curse and swear, and glory in my shame. I learned to tell lies for sport, to play at cards, to dance, to work the greatest part of the Sabbath day, and to make a mock at all religious people, saying they were all hypocrites. And in this deplorable condition I remained till I was near twenty years old.

During this time I was twice in great danger of being drowned going to Holy Island in very dark nights. It was also a flowing tide: I had lost my way: and the sea came in fast upon me. But both times I was brought safe to land. I was serious for awhile after. But I then got into laughing, trifling company; and my seriousness soon wore off.

Another time, being with a gang of smugglers, a king's officer clapped a pistol to my breast, and swore bitterly, if I lifted my hand he would shoot me through the heart. The thought of instant death shocked me much. But this too I stifled by drinking and dancing. So I continued fast asleep in the devil's arms, till one day as I was working in the shop with my father, my mind ran upon a match of drinking and dancing, in which I was engaged to join in the evening. Suddenly I heard a voice as from heaven, saying, "What if thou should drop down dead in the midst of the dance! wouldst thou go to heaven?" I said, "No, I am not fit for heaven." Immediately I felt I had passed sentence upon myself; and that if I went not to heaven, hell was my portion: light broke in: I was filled with horror: I saw myself hanging over the mouth of hell by the brittle thread of life.

My father looked me in the face, and asked, "What is the matter?" But I made no answer. He said, Certainly something is the matter. For you are sometimes red as scarlet, and in a moment white as chalk. But still I spoke not one word: my mouth was stopped: I was guilty before God. Yet I was thankful that I was alive, and thought, "O that God would let me live one day longer! In how different a manner would I spend my time! Surely not in the ways of sin."

Soon after I sat down to dinner; but I could not swallow a morsel. My mother observing this, was very angry with my father, thinking I was grieved at something he had said. But finding that was not the case, she was quite struck, and turning to me, said, "My dear, why do you not eat your dinner?" I made no answer. Indeed I could not, for my heart was fit to break.

In the evening my company came in to carry me to the dancing. To their great surprise, they found me reading the Bible. They asked my father and mother, "Are not you willing he should go with us?" They said, "Yes; but we think he is not well." They said, "Come, we shall soon cure him. Lay hold. We will carry him." "Do," says another, "and I will carry his fiddle." I looked at them and said very mildly, "If you do carry me I shall be of no use to you. For one dance I will not dance this night: and a tune I will not play." They started, and left me.

When our family went to rest, I durst not go to bed, for fear I should awake in hell. I tried to pray, but could not. I stayed for some time, with my heart as hard as a stone. At last I fell upon my knees, and with a flood of tears cried out, "Lord, be merciful to me; for I am a great sinner." I found my mind a little eased, and went to bed and slept comfortably.

But in the morning my trouble was as great as ever. When I went out about my business many mocked me for my gravity: others said, "It is a great pity so fine a young man should lose the use of his reason." But what grieved me more, was to see all the people, as I had been myself, fast asleep in the devil's arms.

On Sunday morning I rose early, and the tide being out, walked to Lonwick on the main land, and went to a Presbyterian meeting. The minister's text was, "I will arise and go to my father." It was a word spoken in season. I thought he looked at me all the time. People did indeed look at me; many of them knowing me well, and therefore wondering how I came there. When I came home my mother begged me with tears to reveal what was upon my mind. She said, "What is it you have done? Have you murdered any body?" I said, "No, mother; I have murdered nobody; but I have almost murdered my poor soul."

As soon as the inhabitants of the island found I would not drink, swear, or work on the Lord's day, they were violently angry, so that I could hardly walk the street for the mob setting upon me. And my father and mother insisted on my working at my business on the Lord's day. But I told them, "No: never more, I will sooner have the flesh torn off my bone." My prayer now was, to get out of this ungodly place: and a fortnight after, my parents consented: so I left them, not knowing whither I was going, but desiring to follow my father's trade, provided I could find any master who would not require me to work on the Lord's day.

When I came to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, as I was going down Pilgrim-street, I saw abundance of people going along, who seemed remarkably serious. I asked a man, "Pray who are all these?" He answered, "These are all Wesleyites; they are coming from the preaching." -- This was the first time I saw or heard of them. The next day I went on to Sunderland, where I found out my father's brother, and inquired if he knew any barber who did not work on a Sunday. "Yes," said he, "there is Tommy Parker." So to him I went without delay.

To my great surprise, the sailors that came into our shop did not curse or swear at all. But several of them took my master by the hand, and said, "How do you do, brother?" I asked, "Pray sir, are all these your brothers?" He said, "We are all brethren in Christ,"--When Sunday came I got one to show me to the preaching house, where I saw my master in the pulpit! His text was, "He shall bring forth the top stone with shouting, crying, Grace, grace unto it." I then told him the distress of my mind. He advised me to go to London, telling me I should there have all the means of grace in the greatest abundance. I went to London, where my cousin Thomas Freyer soon got me into a shop: and not long after, on my telling him I wanted to meet in a class, carried me to the Tabernacle. I went into the vestry, and told two gentlemen I found there, "I should be glad to meet in a class that I might speak my experience, and tell of the work of God which I have found upon my heart." One of them said, "What class shall we put him into?" The other answered, "Indeed I cannot tell. Mr. Wesley's classes are far more strictly looked after than ours." If you please then, said I, I will go and meet in one of his classes. He looked at me and said, "Really, young man, I

cannot blame you." I went immediately to Mr. Wesley, who, after a little conversation, gave me a note of admittance.

As I now prayed much, and heard many sermons, and abstained from all known sin, I began to be very easy, supposing myself to be a very good Christian. And one day, in a house in Ratcliffe highway, I began talking as if I had gone a great way in religion. This an old gentlewoman observing, came, and taking me by the hand, said, "Do you know your sins are pardoned?" I answered, "I hope so." She said, "I fear not: for if they were you would have the witness in yourself. Satan cares not how far we go in religion, if we will but stop short of this. I advise you, when go home, pray earnestly to the Lord to show you whether your sins are pardoned.-- If they are, to give you the witness of it: if they are not, never to let you rest without it."

I was quite speechless, finding I had stopped short of the prize. I hastened home, praying all the way. I watched, I prayed, I waited in all the means of grace, longing for Christ to come into my heart. I could hardly eat any food till Sunday came, when I went to the Seven-dials, to hear Mr. Wesley. I was much blessed under the word, expecting every moment to receive the witness. On Monday, as I sat at work, I was thinking the sermon over again, when on a sudden my mind was whirled away, and filled with vain imaginations. After a time I cried out, "Lord, what a wicked wretch am I! Wilt thou pardon this, with all my other sins?" In a moment the Lord said to my heart "My blood hath atoned not only for this, but for all the sins which thou hast ever committed. Thou art no more thine own. Thou art bought with a price; and I will give thee power to glorify me with thy body and thy spirit, which are mine." In that moment my hell was turned into heaven -- a joyful day that ascertained the kingdom mine just two years after the Lord had awakened me out of the sleep of death.

I seemed now to be in another world: every thing new. Every thing about me was comfortable; for the Lord smiled upon my soul. For two days and two nights every breath I drew was praise and prayer, having sweet intercourse opened between God and my soul. When Satan tempted, I said, "Go to my Lord!" And the temptation died away. Whatever I wanted, I could make my request known to my reconciled Father for it, in the name of his well beloved Son, and he granted my petition.

I asked of him two temporal blessings; the one, that he would give me a lawful calling, wherein I might not be so continually teased to work on the Sabbath day: the other, that he would give me a help mate. He answered me in both. He inclined the heart of a watchmaker to teach me his trade, who afterward gave me his granddaughter to wife. And from that time we have sweetly gone on, hand in hand toward our Father's Kingdom.

Some time after, having a great desire to see my parents once more, I went with my wife to Holy Island. -- But now I was exposed to a danger I had not foreseen. I was employed in my trade by some of the first people in the country, and frequently invited to their houses; whereby pride and other unholy tempers began to revive in my soul. However, by the grace of God, I continued fighting against them, though sometimes conquering, sometimes yielding. Indeed I seemed like a door upon the hinges, turning backward and forward. This filled me with unspeakable grief; and though I still knew God was reconciled, yet I went mourning all the day long, because of inbred sin.

But about fourteen years ago, as I was one night sitting in my house at Alnwick, in Northumberland, my family being all in bed, I began to read one of Mr. Walsh's sermons. When I came to those words, "Salvation is twofold; emptying us of evil, and filling us with good!" my heart was melted down, and I cried out, Lord, give me at least the former part of thy salvation. Empty me of evil!" In a moment I felt such a change as no tongue can express. I felt every kind and degree of anger and resentment quite taken out of my heart. My pride also was gone; and I was thoroughly content to be despised of all men. I was crucified to the world; to all its honours and profits; all its comforts and pleasures. The fear of man was quite gone; and so was all conformity to the world. I regarded neither the smiles nor the frowns of great men; being quite set at liberty, and finding nothing in my heart but pure love -- love free from dissimulation, abhorring that which is evil, and cleaving to that which is good.

I cried out, "What shall I render unto the Lord for all the benefits he hath done unto me!" The Lord said, "Go work in my vineyard. As thou has been a faithful advocate for the devil, be now a faithful labourer for me." I shivered at the thought, knowing the littleness of my talents, and fearing I should dishonour his cause: yet, believing it was his will, I promised to go, though with my life in my hand...

It is now about fourteen years since I began, according to my ability, to call sinners to repentance. And I bless God, though I have had many discouragements, I am not yet weary. I have not laboured in vain. God has given me to see a little fruit of my labours. Blessed be his name, he has washed me from my sins; and I know he is able to keep me from falling, and to enable me to grow in grace, till he receives me into his glory. W. F.

Source: "The EXPERIENCE of several eminent Methodist Preachers with an account of their Call to and Success in the Ministry in a series of letters written by themselves to the Rev. John Wesley" J. Collard, Printer, New York 1837

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