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

Vol. I -- Named Accounts

PHILIP GATCH
The Second American-born Circuit Rider

The Rev. Philip Gatch was born in 1751, and was seven months and two weeks older than the Rev. William Watters, who was born on the 16th of October of the same year. These two were the first native American Methodist itinerants.

Mr. Gatch says, "I learned to read when quite young; took delight in my books, especially those which gave a history of the times of pious persons. A sister older than myself used to watch over me with tender regard. Once, when I used a bad word, the meaning of which I scarcely understood, she reprov'd me in such a manner as to make a deep and lasting impression on my feelings; my conscience was tender, and I felt great pain of soul on account of it. I seldom omitted my prayers; hated sinful acts in general; feared the Lord, and wished to serve Him -- but knew not how; all was dark; priests and people, in this respect, were alike.

"When in my seventeenth year my mind became less concerned for my future state than formerly. This was produced by vain and wicked associations; but God, in his mercy, soon arrested me in this dangerous situation. I was prostrated upon a bed of affliction, and a beloved sister, about the same time, was called into eternity. Soon after this an uncle died suddenly. These visitations greatly alarmed me. The subject of death and judgment rested with great weight upon my mind. These impressions were strengthened by reading the Whole Duty of Man and Russell's Seven Sermons. I mourned in secret places, often wished I had never been born. I could see no way of escape; death and judgment, and, which was still worse, a never-ending eternity of pain and misery, were constantly before me. At this time the state of my mind became visible to others. My father became concerned about my situation; but such was his ignorance of spiritual things, that all he could do for me was to caution me against carrying the matter too far. Having no one to instruct me, a wicked and deceitful heart to contend with, vain and ungodly examples before me, I was constantly led astray.

"By experience I learned that the pleasures of sin were delusive, of short duration, and that they always left a sting behind them. I found, too, that my fallen and corrupt nature was

strengthened by the indulgence of evil propensities. To counteract these, I determined to try a course of self-denial. I resolved to break down the carnal mind by crucifying the flesh, with its lusts and affections. I found this course to be of great service to me. All this time I had not heard a Gospel sermon. I had read some of the writings of the Society of Friends, and had a great desire to attend their meetings, but had not the opportunity. I felt that I had lost my standing in the Established Church by not performing the obligations of my induction into it, and this was a source of great distress to me. I desired rest to my soul, but had no one to take me by the hand and lead me to the fountain of life. From the errors of my ways it seemed I could not escape.

"I was alarmed by dreams, by sickness, and by various other means, which were sent by God, in his mercy, for my good. Indeed, from a child, the Spirit of grace strove with me; but great was the labor of mind that I felt, and I did not know the way to be saved from my guilt and wretchedness. It pleased God, however, to send the Gospel into our neighborhood, in January, 1772, through the instrumentality of the Methodists. Previous to this time, Robert Strawbridge, a local preacher from Ireland, had settled between Baltimore and Fredericktown, and under his ministry three others were raised up -- Richard Owen, Sater Stephenson, and Nathan Perigo. Nathan Perigo was the first to introduce Methodist preaching in the neighborhood where I lived. He possessed great zeal, and was strong in the faith of the Gospel. I was near him when he opened the exercises of the first meeting I attended. His prayer alarmed me much; I never had witnessed such energy nor heard such expressions in prayer before. I was afraid that God would send some judgment upon the congregation for my being at such a place. I attempted to make my escape, but was met by a person at the door who proposed to leave with me; but I knew he was wicked, and that it would not do to follow his counsel, so I returned.

"The sermon was accompanied to my understanding by the Holy Spirit. I was stripped of all my self-righteousness. It was to me as filthy rags when the Lord made known to me my condition. I saw myself altogether sinful and helpless, while the dread of hell seized my guilty conscience. Three weeks from this time I attended preaching again at the same place. My distress became very great; my relatives were all against me, and it was hard to endure my father's opposition. He asked me what the matter was, but I made him no answer, as I thought others saw my case as I felt it. He said I was going beside myself, and should go to hear the Methodists no more; that his house should not hold two religions. I thought this was no great objection, fearing there was little religion in the house; but I made no reply, still intending to attend preaching as I should have opportunity.

"It afterward occurred to me that I had heard of the Methodists driving some persons mad, and began to fear it might be the case with me. I had often been distressed on account of sin, but I had never realized before the condition I was then in. This gave the enemy the advantage over me, and I began to resist conviction, determining, however, that I would live a religious life; but O how soon did I fail in my purpose! I was about five weeks in this deluded state. O the patience and long-suffering of God! He might in justice have cut me down as a cumberer of the ground. This I felt and feared. I was aroused from seeing a man who was very much intoxicated, in great danger of losing his life, and, as I supposed, of going to hell. The anguish of my soul now became greater than I can describe.

"I again went to hear Mr. Perigo preach, and felt confounded under the word. The man at whose house the meeting was had found peace. After preaching he followed me into the yard, and while conversing with me his words reached my heart; it was tendered, and I wept. Before I got home my father heard what had taken place, and he, with several others, attacked me; but the Lord helped me, so that with the Scriptures I was enabled to withstand them.

"My friends now sought in good earnest to draw me away from the Methodists, bringing many false accusations against them; but I concluded, be it as it may be with them, it was not well with me. My cry was day and night to God for mercy. I feared that there was no mercy for me. I had neglected so many calls from God, that I feared that he had now given me over to hardness of heart, and that my day of grace was for ever gone. I continued under these awful apprehensions for some time.

"On the 26th of April I attended a meeting. After remaining some time, I gave up all hopes, and left the house. I felt that I was too bad to remain where the people were worshipping God. At length a friend came out to me, and requested me to return to the meeting; believing him to be a good man, I returned with him, and, under the deepest exercise of mind, bowed myself before the Lord, and said in my heart, If thou wilt give me power to call on thy name, how thankful will I be. Immediately I felt the power of God to affect my body and soul. It went through my whole system. I felt like crying aloud. God said, by his Spirit, to my soul, My power is present to heal thy soul, if thou wilt but believe. I instantly submitted to the operation of the Spirit of God, and my poor soul was set at liberty. I felt as if I had got into a new world. I was certainly brought from hell's dark door, and made nigh unto God by the blood of Jesus.

"Tongue cannot express
The sweet comfort and peace
Of a soul in its earliest love."

"Ere I was aware I was shouting aloud, and should have shouted louder if I had had more strength. I was the first person known to shout in that part of the country. The order of God differs from the order of man. He knows how to do his own work, and will do it in his own way, though it often appears strange to us. Indeed, it is a strange work to convert a precious soul. I had no idea of the greatness of the change, till the Lord gave me to experience it. A grateful sense of the mercy and goodness of God to my poor soul overwhelmed me. I tasted and saw that the Lord was good.

"Two others found peace the same evening, which made seven conversions in the neighborhood. I returned home happy in the love of God. I felt great concern for my parents, but I knew not what would be the result of my change. My father had threatened to drive me from home, and I knew that he was acquainted with what had taken place the night before, for he heard me in my exercises near three-quarters of a mile, and knew my voice. But God has his way in the whirlwind, and all things obey him. Up to this time my father was permitted to oppose me, but now God said by his providence to the boisterous waves of persecution, Thou shalt go no farther. He said to me, while under conviction, 'There is your eldest brother; he has better learning than you, and if there is anything good in it, why does he not find it out?' That brother was present when I received the blessing, and became powerfully converted. My father inquired of him the next morning what had taken place at the meeting; he gave him the particulars, and wound up by saying,

if they did not all experience the same change they would go to hell. This was a nail in a sure place. My father had dreamed, a short time before, that a sprout grew up through his house, and that its progress was so rapid he became alarmed for the safety of his house; he wanted to remove it, but was afraid to cut it down lest the house should be destroyed by the fall. He found an interpretation to his dream in what was taking place in the family.

Perigo had made an appointment for Monday evening, half way between his own house and my father's, for the accommodation of two neighborhoods. At this time we had no circuit preaching, and he began to be pressed by the many calls made on him by those who were perishing for the bread of life.

"My brother and I attended the meeting, and it was a blessed time; several were converted. At the request of my brother, Mr. Perigo made an appointment to preach at my father's on the ensuing Thursday evening. My brother proposed to me to have prayers with the family on Tuesday evening. I felt diffident in taking up the cross, but told him if he could induce two of the neighbors to come in and join us, I would try. The neighbors came at the time appointed the family were called together as orderly as if they had always been accustomed to family worship. I read two chapters, and then exhorted them to look to God in prayer, assuring them that he would not suffer them to be deceived. The Lord blessed me with a spirit of prayer, and he made manifest his power among us. I rose from my knees and spoke to them some time, and it had a gracious effect upon the family. Thenceforward we attended to family prayer.

"Mr. Perigo, according to his appointment, preached, and spent some time in conversation with my parents. He formed two classes in the neighborhood, and established a prayer meeting, at which both classes came together. By this time many had experienced religion. My parents, and most of their children, a brother-in-law, and two of his sisters, in about five weeks, had joined the church. The work was great, for it was the work of God. In our prayer and class meetings I sometimes gave a word of exhortation, and was blessed in so doing. After some time, my mind became exercised on the subject of extending my sphere of action, and becoming more public in my exercises. When I first began to speak a little in our neighborhood meetings, I entertained no such thoughts; but now my impressions became so strong that my mind was thrown into great conflict. I felt such great weakness that to proceed appeared to be impossible; to draw back was a gloomy thought. My comforts failed, and I sank into a state of despondency. I endeavored to stifle those impressions, but they would return with increased force, and again a sense of my weakness would sink my feelings lower than ever. I knew not what to do. I read the first chapter of Jeremiah, portions of which seemed to suit my condition. I then concluded if the Lord would sanctify me, I should be better prepared to speak his word. I prayed that the impression to speak the word of the Lord might be removed from my mind, and that he would give me to feel the need of being sanctified. My prayer was heard, and he granted my request. I labored under a sense of want, but not of guilt. I needed strength of soul. God knew that it was necessary for me to tarry in Jerusalem till endued with power from on high. The struggle was severe but short. I spent the most of my time in prayer, but sometimes only with groans that I could not utter. I had neither read nor heard much on the subject, till in the midst of my distress a person put into my hands Mr. Wesley's sermon on Salvation by Faith. The person knew nothing of my exercise of mind.

"I thought if salvation was to be obtained by faith, why not now? I prayed, but the Comforter tarried. I prayed again, and still the answer was delayed. God had his way in the work; my faith was strengthened and my hope revived. I told my brother that I believed God would bless me that night in family prayer. He knew that my mind was in a great struggle, but did not know the pursuit of my heart. In the evening, while my brother-in-law prayed with the family, a great trembling seized me. After it had subsided, I was called upon to pray. I commenced, and after a few minutes I began to cry to God for my own soul, as there was not another to be saved or lost. The Spirit of the Lord came down upon me, and the opening heavens shone around me. By faith I saw Jesus at the right hand of the Father. I felt such a weight of glory that I fell with my face to the floor, and the Lord said by his Spirit, You are now sanctified, seek to grow in the fruit of the Spirit. Gal. v.22, 23. This work and the instruction of Divine truth were sealed on my soul by the Holy Ghost. My joy was full. I related to others what God had done for me. This was in July, a little more than two months after I had received the Spirit of justification."

Source: "A History of the Rise of Methodism in America,"
by John Lednum

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THE END