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

Vol. I -- Named Accounts

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(Methodist)

The afternoon of the Sabbath on which I joined the M. E. Church, found me alone in my chamber, engaged in prayer and meditation, and while thus employed I found peace in believing. The only explanation I can give of my experience at this time is this: While thinking of divine goodness in redemption, and particularly of the resurrection of Christ, I felt an influence of love, suddenly pervading my heart, so unlike any thing, I had ever realized before, that I received it immediately from God. I wondered, not only at the loving kindness and condescension of Him I had so insulted and grieved, but at myself for having so long remained in ignorance of a something so delightful, and perfectly within my reach. My heart was indeed, strangely warmed; and its prevailing desire was to get my arms about the world, and lay it at the feet of my Redeemer.

From childhood an impression had followed me that God could call me to the Ministry; and so strong did this impression become that, at length, I had no hope of acceptance with Him while I withheld my consent. This, I am persuaded, helped to keep me irreligious for some time.

When I was seeking pardon, the subject was readily disposed of by leaving it to the Lord. My call to the ministry was early recognized by the Church; ere I completed my probation, I was sent out in a stress of circumstances by the preachers to fill their appointments, and the close of ten months, as an professor of religion, found me a licensed local preacher.

The way into the itinerancy -- mysteriously to me at the time -- did not open so readily; still the fields for useful labor whitened all around me. In Autumn of the year 1841, my father fell at his post (St. Mary's Circuit, Md.), nobly battling for his Master to the last. At the instance of the Circuit, I, by a seeming sacrifice, filled out his Conference year. Returning to Virginia, I resumed my business as a teacher, and found ample opportunity, as a local preacher, to stir the gift that was in me. The colored people, especially, recognized me as a preacher raised up for them. From seventy to eighty embraced religion in one season; some of whom -- preachers and laymen -- remain unto this day, "but some are fallen asleep." In March, 1844, I was admitted into the Baltimore Annual Conference on trial; and have been on the effective list ever since.

My convictions on the subject of sanctification have not, throughout, been as uniform as were my early convictions for sin. On entering the ministry I received our theology entire as of the Bible. As far as I had tested it, I had demonstrated its truth, and I readily inferred in its favor where I had not experimented upon it. The advice of my seniors was, preach sanctification, whether you enjoy it or not, preach it until you do enjoy it. Acting on this advice, I frequently introduced the subject into my sermons, and, mostly, with gracious effect. I was, occasionally, subjected to mingled emotions of pleasure and shame, in hearing my efforts on this subject acknowledged in the detail of religious experience; pleasure that God had thus honored me; shame that laic experience should be so in advance of my own.

A striking instance of this may be admissible just here. Elijah Merchant, a young man of Augusta County, Va., obtained the blessing of perfect love, and in professing it, acknowledged his indebtedness to a sermon of mine. The manner in which this experience was narrated -- producing the mingled emotions above referred to -- impressed me that God had called him to the ministry. Such being his own conviction, I procured a recommendation to the Annual Conference for him. He traveled his first year as my colleague; and was more abundant in labor than almost any other man I ever knew. He always deferred to me as his superior, yet, imperceptibly to him, his elevated style of piety always impressed me with my comparative religious insignificance. In 1852 he was elected for the California work, and soon fell a martyr to his missionary zeal.

Strange to say! about the time this young man entered upon his labors on the Pacific coast, my theory of sanctification began to undergo some modification. The late Rev. John Hersey -- whose fidelity to the rigid simplicity of primitive Methodism has passed into a proverb wherever he was known -- published a work on this subject, convicting the Wesleyan theory, as was supposed, of marked inconsistencies, maintaining the oneness of conversion and sanctification; and that religion throughout is but a system of growth. Though this work was early suppressed by the author, at the instance of his quarterly Conference, officially expressed -- for his relation to the Church was that of a local preacher -- it has been sufficiently before the public to embolden a secret skepticism which seemed to be awaiting the favorable opportunity for development.

The subject came up for discussion before the Preachers' Meeting of Baltimore, of which I was a member, and, to my mind, at the time, the Hersey theory seemed the more ably sustained. Unfortunately -- as I now see -- I embraced it; and soon became intensely opposed to the sanctification hobby, as it was called. The natural result was, I did not preach it as clearly as I had done, and suffered corresponding loss of ministerial power. I sometimes mourned deeply the seeming, decline of my usefulness, and painfully queried the reason why? I had large and attentive congregation; I tried to declare the whole counsel of God, as I understood it; till there seemed to be something lacking. I occasionally reviewed my new theory of sanctification, and, at length, was compelled to concede the following points, namely:

1. If conversion and sanctification be identical, I certainly was not converted, for I feel the remains of the carnal mind still lurking within; and, while I have love, it is not that perfect love which casts out all tormenting fear.

2. If conversion and sanctification be identical, it seems strange that I should not be as much favored in preaching them so, as I formerly in presenting them after the Wesleyan theory.

3. If conversion and sanctification be the same, it seem strange that so many excellent people, the least likely to be deceived in spiritual matter, should have believed, experienced, and taught differently, even with their latest breath, and under the inspiration of their final and greatest triumph.

4. And, finally, if they be identical, why do I not grow in grace, in believing, and teaching them, as rapidly as I did when I believed and taught differently?

The result of such reflection was to bring me back to my old theory, and to some of my former enjoyment in preaching it.

In the year 1862 I was appointed Presiding Elder of the Baltimore District (E. Balti. Conf.); a post of responsibility which, I felt, demanded the improvement of my Christian graces. In essaying to act on my convictions, I felt that I making some religious progress. In 1864, while attending, the General Conference in Philadelphia, I experienced some serious premonitions of nervous prostration which, however, measurably disappeared in a few months. But toward the close of the Conference year, death laid his hand on my eldest daughter, and though she departed in peace, trusting in Jesus, the event helped to revive the evidences of my physical weakness. Shortly after the succeeding, Conference, I was compelled to desist from active duty, hoping, that a few weeks of rest would work wonders for my health; but my few weeks extended to nearly five months.

Meanwhile I concluded that, as I could not preach to others, I might as well address myself to the work of personal improvement in experimental religion. Fond of biography, especially of early Wesleyan biography, I re-read Carvosso and Hester Ann Rogers. I took Mr. Fletcher's experience as given by Mrs. Rogers, and I "reckoned myself dead unto sin." I took the theory of the Altar, as reported from Mrs. Palmer, -- for I had not then read any of her works, -- and made a full consecration of myself to God; and I felt, at the time, that I had not sacrificed in vain; though I had not that fullness of internal evidence which I desired. On this latter account I concluded not to be hasty in my public confession of the blessing, but to take time for thorough self examination by the most reliable tests; and I was the more inclined to be backward, from the fact that such a profession seemed a little too much for me. I told my wife, but no one else.

About that time I obtained the life of Bramwell, and, weak and nervous as I was, it had well nigh proved -- too strong meat for me. When I compared his devotion and godly might with my own inefficiency, I became utterly discouraged. I descended to a gloomy valley, seemingly bounded only by the mount of the law. Yet, singular as it may seem, in its deepest solitudes, I could, with Peter, appeal to the searcher of heart and say, "Thou knowest all things; Thou knowest that I love Thee." Assailed by the fiercest temptations, with but little bodily strength to bear up under my mental depressions, and greatly hindered by my unbelief, I said, continually, with Job, "Thou He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

But, by degrees, I accepted the fact that there was another mount on the boundary of my valley, and that was Calvary, and by getting nearer to it, I arose gradually from my morbidness and gloom. On resuming the duties of my district, I oft alluded to my recent experience, and in naming my act of consecration, would go so far as to assert, in a negative form, my belief in its acceptance; that is, I asserted that, "I would not say it had not been accepted;" and I urged others to go and do likewise.

One evening, after I had indulged in this train of remark, in a love feast, a brother in whom I had great confidence arose, and said, "The key note has been given out right this evening; I have lived in the enjoyment of perfect love for some time." At this I felt, greatly encouraged. Next day, as I was reflecting, on the subject, I queried, Why is not my evidence brighter? What am I waiting for? Do I ever expect to say, well done, to myself? No; "for by the deeds of the law, shall no man living be justified." How then, if I cannot be perfect in or of myself, am I to reach fully the blessing of perfection? Why, I must be complete in Christ. If then my completeness is to be in Christ, is it not as much mine to claim now, as it ever will be? Most assuredly. Then my heart said with a power of faith, it had not exercised before, it is mine; and, coincident with my faith, I, by the Spirit, had the full assurance of faith. I was exceedingly filled with love and peace; and having, to preside in a quarterly conference an evening or two afterward, when the business was concluded, I bore my positive, unqualified testimony to the power of the atoning blood, to cleanse from all sin. So I did all around the district, in the quarterly conference, quarterly love feast, from the pulpit, and in the social circle. On this elevation I stand today, and expect, through grace, to stand to the end.

I have, by this experience, gained much in every way. Fullness and uniformity appear to be the words most expressive of my present, in contrast with my past enjoyments. I am living more by faith, and less by impulse. Formerly I often obeyed the divine law from a sheer sense of duty; now, I love the law because "it is holy, and just, and good." Formerly temptation from without found some responses from within, of which I am now happily relieved. Formerly I dreaded sudden death, desiring some little notice before I went hence to be no more, that I might assure myself of thorough preparation; now I live to please God, perfectly satisfied that thus living, I cannot die wrong. In a word, I feel that I am a better man, a better preacher, better every way; not in or of myself -- for I never understood my own insignificance so well -- but through Him that hath loved me, and given Himself for me, and washed me in His own blood. To the ever adorable Trinity Father, Son, and Holy Ghost be equal, and undivided, and everlasting praise. Amen.

Source: "Pioneer Experiences" by Phoebe Palmer

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