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

Vol. I -- Named Accounts

JOHN EDWARD RISLEY

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I was born in Greensboro, Vermont, March 27, 1802. My parents were both pious before my birth, and lived consistent Christian lives until the termination of their earthly pilgrimage, so that their children had the benefit of their religious teachings and Godly example to guide them in the way to heaven...

In the winter of 1814-15, we moved from Vermont to Hartford, Connecticut. In 1819 I was an apprentice boy in Middletown. About this time, while reflecting upon my past conduct, I felt to abhor myself, and wished that I had never been born. I was sensible that I was a sinner, and that if I should die in that state I should be lost forever. But I grieved the Spirit and continued to sin with a high hand.

In April, 1820, Rev. John Newland Maffitt came to Middletown and commenced those labors which resulted in a great revival, and the conversion of many souls. Under his earnest, faithful, and eloquent preaching, I was awakened to a sense of my lost condition as a sinner against God. A short time previous to this I had run to greater lengths in sin than ever: spending Sundays in playing cards and reading novels. I tremble when I look back upon the wicked life I was then living, and think how swiftly I was running the downward road to my ruin for time and eternity, and how near I stood to that fearful precipice over which I should soon have plunged had not God in great mercy arrested my wayward steps. Surely I was a brand plucked from the fire!

Mr. Maffitt began his labors Sunday morning, preaching through the day and evening, and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday evenings.

On Sunday one of my shopmates told me there was a great preacher at the Methodist chapel, -- a stranger, -- and invited me to go and hear him. But I was so much taken up with reading novels, that I did not go until Thursday night. His text was in Heb. xi. 24-26: "By faith, Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing

rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt, for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward."

The power of the Holy Spirit attended his word to my heart. I felt that I was a lost, undone sinner, and that without an interest in the Saviour's blood I should be forever miserable. While the good Spirit was thus making serious impressions upon my heart, some of my young companions in sin discovered it and laughed me in the face. I yielded to shame, and grieved the Holy Spirit. How justly might He have withdrawn His gracious influence from me forever! But blessed be His holy name, He did not deal with me according to my deserts, but according to His great mercy. My wicked associates invited me to go with them to the grog shop. I gave way to the temptation and went; and after pouring down a dram of that liquid fire that has been the means of sending so many souls to the fires of hell, I returned to the chapel, where I found the children of God zealously engaged praying for penitent souls at the altar. I there found some who had recently been engaged with me in the service of the prince of darkness, and felt a disposition to laugh at them. Mr. Maffitt spoke to me, asking if I had got religion, and if I desired it? I told him in a contemptuous way that I had not got it, nor did I desire it.

He told me to mark his words: that I should kneel at the altar to be prayed for; which came to pass a few days after. Oh, how it shocks me when I look back and remember, that I was then found among the scoffers and opposers of the religion of Jesus! May God help me now to be as zealous in his cause as I then was in the service of the devil! Grieving the Holy Spirit as I did, is it not wondrous mercy that He did not wholly forsake and leave me to my sin and its dreadful consequences? But instead of this, the Spirit followed me, and the next day I was under serious impressions; but I was still unbelieving, until a young man, who had but a few days before found the pearl of great price, told me that God had promised to save all who would believe in Christ, and that I, even I, though I might be the chief of sinners, must believe that He would save me because He had promised to do it. At this time a faint ray of hope sprang up that I should some time be a Christian; and that hope gave greater joy than I had found in sin.

The next Sunday I listened to Brother Jewett, the pastor, and it seemed to me that I had never heard preaching before -- that every word was for me; and now it seemed to me it was time to come to a decision, either to seek religion until I found it, even if I went mourning all the rest of my life, or to give up seeking and go back to the world. Between the morning and afternoon meetings I went into the shop alone, locked the door and paced the floor in deep anguish of spirit. I endeavored to weigh the tremendous question, whether I would be a Christian or not, and bring to mind what would be the consequences of the decision I then made, whether it was to serve God or satan. I endeavored to bring home to my mind on the one hand what would be the awful consequences of a life of sin, in this world, at death, and in eternity; and on the other hand, what glorious results would follow from a life devoted to the service of God. At the end of this hour of reflection, I was ready to say, what folly! what madness! to barter the happiness of my mortal and immortal existence, to throw away a crown, a kingdom, to lose heaven, to lose my soul, to lose all, for the poor short-lived, uncertain, unsatisfying pleasures of sin? My resolution was taken at that time, which has never been changed; that let others do as they would, as for me, I would not be so unwise for myself, so cruel to my own soul, as to incur the penalty of sin; but would be a Christian.

After preaching, in the evening, the seekers were invited to come to the altar for prayers. Notwithstanding the resolution I had formed to seek the Lord in the use of all the appointed means, yet I felt it to be a great cross, and was unwilling to go, though I had promised a young friend that I would if the invitation was given. The young brother to whom I had made the promise came to me and urged me to go forward. But I was ashamed to have the large congregation see him talking to me, and I sent him away. A number of awakened sinners surrounded the altar, and about eleven o'clock, after the brethren had been praying for them two hours, and some had been brought into liberty, I rose from my seat, and, looking around, saw my wicked companions laughing at me.

That was, perhaps, the most critical moment of my existence. If I had yielded to shame, I should have been lost. But oh! blessed be God! by the influence of His Spirit it had the contrary effect, and made me more determined to press forward. I went and knelt at the altar, and instantly my hard heart was softened, and was melted into tenderness and contrition before God. I felt that I had left the world behind, and was more firmly fixed in my determination to seek the Saviour. I shall have reason to praise God to all eternity that I took that step. I felt that I had taken the first step towards coming out from the world. I had professed in that public manner to be a seeker of religion, and the great crisis of my life was passed. I shall ever feel to recommend this means of grace, not only because it was a great help to me, but because of the happy influence it has had upon scores and hundreds of weeping penitents that have come under my observation since that time.

The next evening I attended a prayer meeting at Brother Frothingham's, where the people of God were engaged in prayer, for just such poor, broken-hearted wanderers as I then was. After a number of prayers had been offered, one of the brethren said that if there were any present who were deeply awakened to a sense of their lost condition, while out of Christ, if they would tell their feelings, it might prove a blessing to them. To do this, seemed indeed a heavy cross, but as I had resolved to leave no means untried, I stood up trembling, and with a faltering voice, told them I felt myself to be a poor, lost sinner, and asked their prayers.

That moment I felt the load of sin rolled off, and my mind was very calm and peaceful. I felt a desire to join my voice with the brethren and sisters in singing the praise of God, which I thought I could do from the heart. The tempter said, This is not religion; you are not a Christian, and it would be wrong for you to join God's people in singing His praise; and I did not sing. I went from that meeting distressed, and praying for conviction. A day or two after this, I met Brother Jewett, the pastor, and I told him my feelings. He said, You must pray for conversion, and the evidence of it.

Saturday morning I left my bed with the determination not to eat, nor sleep, until I had found the Saviour. Mr. Garner, at my request, gave me my time for that day, I agreeing to make it up the 4th of July. I took my pocket-Bible, retired to the wood, where no eye but that of God saw me, and spent the day in reading the word of God and prayer. In the evening I attended a class-meeting, where my poor soul found the evidence of pardon, and my heart was filled with peace and love and joy unspeakable. I now felt that I loved the Saviour more than my dearest friends, and more than any earthly good. I knew that I had passed from death unto life, because I loved the brethren. I had great love for the children of God; so much so, that if I saw a stranger on the road before me, I would say in my heart, I wish I knew whether he is a Christian, and hastening

my steps and overtaking him, would speak to him about the heavenly way, and if I found him to be a disciple, would rejoice that I had found another brother in Christ.

I prayed without ceasing, and in everything gave thanks. I felt such delight in the exercise of this blessed privilege, that I was on my knees many times every day. I sought opportunities for prayer, and in cellar, in attic, in barn, behind an unoccupied building, in any secret place, I would bend the knee and spend, if it could be only one minute, in communion with God. I never went to meeting without first retiring for prayer; and in my ministry it was a rule with me to go from my knees to the pulpit.

The older members of the church, in those days, were working Christians. They went in bands of four or five, into neighborhoods two or three miles from the church, and held prayer meetings; and in order to train us young converts for the work, they took us along with them. When they could, they would take a way to the meeting leading by a grove or some other place of privacy, and kneeling on the ground, pray for God's blessing on the meeting; and those prayers were always answered.

I employed my noon-time in prayer in the attic of the shop. As this knee work was new to me, my knees soon became sore, and to remedy this new difficulty, I took some pieces of sheepskin and made a cushion to kneel on.

Mr. Warner, discovering this one day when he went into the attic, and I suppose not mistrusting what it was for, as he was not a Christian, asked me about it. Here was my first temptation to sin; and I yielded and fell. I was ashamed to confess what use I had put the cushion to, and I told him a falsehood. I denied any knowledge of it. Instantly I was overwhelmed with remorse, and went to Mr. Warner and confessed the lie, and asked his forgiveness. But with more earnest pleadings did I besiege the throne of grace and ask forgiveness of God, until I found fulfillment of that promise, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins."

Another evidence of the genuineness of my conversion was, that old things had passed away, and all things had become new. I loved the things which I once hated, and hated the things which I once loved. I not only felt it to be a duty to come out from the world, to forsake all sinful ways, all sinful pleasures; but actually had no relish for the worldly and sinful pleasures which I once delighted in. So marked was the change in this respect, that the very sound of the violin, which had been so enchanting to me, was painfully repulsive; and I could say in strict truth that I enjoyed more happiness in one day in the service of God than I had in all my previous life in sin. I chose the prayermeeting and class-meeting in preference to the place of sinful amusement. I could say, "One day in thy courts is better than a thousand; I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

In those days we had nursing fathers and mothers in the church. They were tenderly solicitous for the growth of the converts, and that they would hold out to the end. They used to tell us with tears, that they would rather follow us to the grave, now that we were rejoicing in hope, than that we should backslide. And they told us we must all work for God, or we should be sure to grow cold and die spiritually. Being thus instructed in accordance with Scripture, I felt it my duty to warn sinners, especially my young companions, of the danger of living in sin, and of the terrible

consequences of rejecting Christ; and to tell them what the Saviour had done for me; and invite them to seek His pardoning mercy. While trying to discharge this duty I encountered some persecution. An apprentice two years my senior was much enraged against me. I had several times spoken to him in love and pity respecting his sin and danger and the remedy, and one day he became so angry that he tried to throw me down stairs. And wicked young men shouted after me, mocked me, and threw stones at me as I walked the streets.

My attention was early called to the great privilege of Christian perfection. A good brother who was a Norwegian, by the name of Bearg, who enjoyed this blessing, would speak of it always in the prayer-meetings, and exhort the members of the church very feelingly to seek it. I had never entertained the idea until I heard it from him, that there was anything higher in Christian experience than regeneration; and I wondered that any who had tasted the joys of pardoned sin should need to be urged to press to higher attainments. I was so happy in the enjoyment of my Saviour's love, that I was ready to resolve: If there are heights and depths, lengths and breadths, of this love, beyond what I have already attained, then am I determined to seek it with all my heart, and never rest until I obtain it.

A young man about my age, who had found the Saviour about the same time, was of the same mind with me in reference to this matter. We spent the noon-time of the Sabbath in prayer and reading the Bible together, and when we found passages that taught this blessed doctrine, we said to each other, There! do not these texts teach and prove it? And we rejoiced as those who had found rich treasure.

For want of proper instruction, I was long seeking this blessing before obtaining it. I did not receive the blessing until the fall of 1821. I was led into this rich experience through the instrumentality of several sisters in Boston, chief among whom was Mrs. Thompson. She was the instrument in God's hand in leading the late Dr. Wilbur Fisk to seek this blessing, which he retained through all the balance of his useful life. It was in her house, while she and two or three others were praying for me, that I received a clearer evidence of this entire cleansing from sin and fullness of love, than I had ever had of regeneration... (The following paragraphs relate to John Risley's restoration into the experience of entire sanctification, a considerable time later in his life.)

But the most important event of this ever-memorable year, was the quickening and renewing baptism of the Holy Ghost, and the blessed results following it, which I received in my own soul. I had years before experienced the blessing of entire sanctification, but at that time was not in the enjoyment of it, and while for the sake of His own cause God had enabled me to preach with considerable liberty, yet I saw but little fruit, either in the quickening of believers or the conversion of sinners, and I felt a painful consciousness of my leanness of soul and, consequent unfitness for my work. In this state of mind I attended Hebron Camp-meeting with the full determination not to leave the ground without that baptism which I so much needed to prepare me to successfully preach a full salvation and lead the church on to higher ground, and bring sinners to Christ.

In a prayer meeting in a tent where the people of God were earnestly seeking the fullness, the Lord restored to me the joy of the great salvation with a clear evidence of the same. I rejoiced

in the full possession of this rich experience without one moment's intermission. I went to my work with greatly increased love to God and the souls of men, and saw immediate and glorious fruit in the conversion of sinners and full salvation of believers. Holiness was the blessed theme in thought, in conversation, in prayer, in family visits, in the closet, in prayer and class meetings, and in the pulpit.

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Source: "Some Experiences of a Methodist Itinerant" by John Edward Risley

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